The Church TRIUMPHANT

CALLED TO A PROPHETIC DESTINY

MARK FINLEY

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Come with me on a

journey of discovery

as we examine Christ's

words about His church,

catch His thrilling vision

for His end-time

people, and reaffirm

our commitment to

His mission.

Introduction

I have written this book because I believe the Seventh-day Adventist Church is called to an urgent, prophetic mission. Despite any challenges it may face, Christ's church will triumph over the powers of hell. It will rise to fulfill its destiny and proclaim the everlasting gospel to "every nation, tribe, tongue, and people" (Revelation 14:6).

I believe in the church because Christ believes in it. He proclaimed, "I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). Christ has promised that His church will triumph at last. All the powers of hell cannot and will not destroy His church.

I have written this book because I believe that the Seventh-day

Adventist Church is the remnant of Bible prophecy as described in Revelation 12:17 and Revelation 14:12 and it has a prophetic mission, a divine call by God, to preach the everlasting gospel of Christ's love, grace, mercy, and righteousness to prepare the world for the coming of Christ.

I also believe that, "enfeebled and defective as it may appear, the church is the one object upon which God bestows in a special sense His supreme regard. It is the theater of His grace, in which He delights to reveal His power to transform hearts."[1] The church is one of the prime places where God transforms us by His grace, empowers us by His Spirit, and sends us out to fulfill His mission in the world.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is under attack today from both within and without. There are those who have lost confidence in the church. Church organization and administration have been subtly and at times not so subtly undermined. The teachings and doctrines of the church have been challenged. But God has not been caught by surprise. He is preparing His church for the greatest missionary movement in history. This world will be lightened with the glory of God (see Revelation 18:1). The "gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world . . . and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14).

Come with me on a journey of discovery as we examine Christ's words about His church, catch His thrilling vision for His end-time people, and reaffirm our commitment to His mission.

—Mark Finley

1. Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1911), 12.

The story of the book
of Acts is the story of
believers brought together
by the Holy Spirit in a
divinely inspired
movement to
impact the world.

ONE

An Urgent Prophetic Calling

Unity Then and Now

One of the things that really matters to God is the unity of His church. The unity of the church is not some peripheral matter.* It is at the very heart of the gospel. Without unity, the church is powerless to proclaim the gospel in its fullness to the world; and worse yet, it becomes a contradiction to the true nature of the gospel.

Jesus revealed the importance of unity in His final intercessory prayer when He prayed, "I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved

* Portions of this chapter previously appeared in *Adventist World*, March–April 2017.

Me" (John 17:23). One of the greatest evidences of the power of the gospel is the unity of the church. When people of different backgrounds, cultures, languages, and dispositions are united by the Holy Spirit in Christ, the world notices. Writing with divine insight, Ellen White puts it this way, "Only as they were united with Christ could the disciples hope to have the accompanying power of the Holy Spirit and the co-operation of angels of heaven. With the help of these divine agencies they would present before the world a united front and would be victorious in the conflict they were compelled to wage unceasingly against the powers of darkness. As they should continue to labor unitedly, heavenly messengers would go before them, opening the way; hearts would be prepared for the reception of truth, and many would be won to Christ."[1]

The Acts model: A united church

One of the most striking New Testament examples of a unified church is the church in the book of Acts. Although there certainly were differences of background and culture and at times heated debates, at its very core the New Testament church exhibited unity. This unity was not a uniformity of understanding on each issue; neither was it a sweet, superficial sentimentalism. It was not some vague, undefinable pluralistic "oneness" where each believer tolerated the other believers' personal views to accomplish some larger ethereal goal. New Testament unity was a unity of faith rooted in the person, message, and mission of Christ. The story of the book of Acts is the story of believers brought together by the Holy Spirit in a divinely inspired movement to impact the world. It is the history of Bible-believing, Christ-centered, men and women passionate about God's mission through His church.

United in the centrality of Christ's love

The disciples were united in their love for Christ. Committed to Christ, they were drawn close together. Their bond of union was forged in Him. Christ was their all in all. Charmed by His love, redeemed by His grace, and empowered by His Spirit, they were—in spite of their differences—united in one body. Ellen White uses an interesting expression to describe the unity of the disciples.

"Christ's name was to be their watchword, their badge of distinction, their bond of union, the authority for their course of action, and the source of their success. Nothing was to be recognized in His kingdom that did not bear His name and superscription."[2] Christ's name was their "bond of union." In other words, they were one in an indissoluble union with Christ.

Revivalist A. W. Tozer puts it this way, "Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So one hundred worshipers meeting together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be were they to become 'unity' conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship."[3]

Tuned to Christ, the disciples were tuned to one another. Christ is the great unifier. Speaking of Christ bridging the divide between Jews and Gentiles, the apostle Paul emphatically declares, "For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation" (Ephesians 2:14). The apostle goes on to say that in Christ, "the whole body [is] joined and knit together" (Ephesians 4:16), and he pleads with the church at Corinth that there "be no schism in

the body"(1 Corinthians 12:25). When hearts are one in Christ, they cannot be far apart.

Could it be that at times our disunity is the result of having drifted from the heart of Christ? Is it possible that our own personal opinions and ideas about a given subject cloud Christ's will on that thing and create dissension between us? Do you think pride ever obscures our vision? Might it also be that the reason the disciples were of "one accord" on the Day of Pentecost is that they unashamedly surrendered their wills to the will of Christ and were willing to surrender anything that separated them from Him and one another? New Testament unity was based on a common commitment to Christ, His message, and His mission.

United in the centrality of Christ's message

The unity of the New Testament church was anchored in the disciples' commitment to the message of Christ. It is often overlooked that when Jesus prayed for the unity of His church, He prayed that His Father would "sanctify them by Your truth, Your word is truth" (John 17:17). The unity of the New Testament church was based on a common commitment to Jesus' revealed truth. New Testament believers accepted the truth about the authoritative revelation of Scripture, salvation by faith, the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the second coming of Christ, the Sabbath, death, resurrection, and Christ's priestly ministry, just to mention a few of our Lord's central teachings. They were brought together through His prophetic word, bonded in truth and committed to the divine revelation of His will.

Luke describes the union of New Testament believers in Acts 2:41: "Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." Notice two significant expressions: (1) "those who gladly received his word" and (2) "they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine." Both of these expressions imply an acceptance of and commitment to the unchanging, eternal truths of Scripture. The unity of the New Testament believers was based on their common commitment to the teachings of Jesus as found in His Word. They were united in the bedrock, foundational truths of Scripture.

Charles Spurgeon spoke of unity in the truth in these straightforward words, "A chorus of ecumenical voices keep harping the unity tune. What they are saying is, 'Christians of all doctrinal shades and beliefs must come together in one visible organization, regardless. . . . Unite, unite!' Such teaching is false, reckless and dangerous. Truth alone must determine our alignments. Truth comes before unity. Unity without truth is hazardous. Our Lord's Prayer in John 17 must be read in its full context. Look at verse 17: 'Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth.' Only those sanctified through the Word can be one in Christ. To teach otherwise is to betray the Gospel."[4]

Ellen White would agree with Spurgeon. Commenting on Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17, she writes, "We cannot surrender the truth in order to accomplish this union; for the very means by which it is to be gained is sanctification through the truth. Human wisdom would change all this, thinking this basis of union too narrow. Men would effect a union through conformity to popular opinions, through a compromise with the world. But truth is God's basis for the unity of his people."[5]

The New Testament church was united through a prophetic, present-truth message. Peter's masterful presentation in Acts 2

was a prophetic message that clearly revealed Jesus as the promised Messiah. In Acts 8, Phillip's prophetic Bible study on Jesus as the Messianic fulfillment of Isaiah 53 led the Ethiopian to a decision for Christ, and Paul's prophetic preaching in Acts 17 in Thessalonica for three consecutive Sabbaths touched Jewish hearts.

The truth as it is in Jesus, prophetically proclaimed, unified the church in a common mission. Truth unites. There is something larger, something greater, something grander than our personal opinions or even our individual convictions. The truth of the Word revealed by the Spirit supersedes everything else.

When the people of God are united in Christ to proclaim the prophetic Word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit, the earth will be lightened with the glory of God. Once again, in this generation, God has entrusted His people with a prophetic, present-truth message.

God has given divine insight concerning what is coming upon God's end-time people. Subtle errors and falsehoods, in the name of truth, will gradually enter in among God's people. "The enemy of souls has sought to bring in the supposition that a great reformation was to take place among Seventh-day Adventists, and that this reformation would consist in giving up the doctrines which stand as the pillars of our faith, and engaging in a process of reorganization. Were this reformation to take place, what would result? The principles of truth that God in His wisdom has given to the remnant church, would be discarded. Our religion would be changed. The fundamental principles that have sustained the work for the last fifty years would be accounted as error"[6]

It is the message of Christ our righteousness in light of the three angels' messages of Revelation 14:6–12 that will unite

His people in one final end-time proclamation of truth. It is the Bible-based, Christ-centered, last-day prophetic message of present truth for this hour that will move the world so it will be written of God's people that those "who have turned the world upside down have come here too" (Acts 17:6).

United in the centrality of Christ's mission

The New Testament church was united in a single-minded passion of sharing Christ and the message of the gospel with the world. Personal preferences and opinions were secondary to the proclamation of the message of the Cross. Overwhelmed by grace, amazed by the goodness of God, and awestruck by the redemption that is in Christ, the disciples overcame their petty differences in light of Christ's larger mission. The one thing that overshadowed everything else was a world in need of Christ's saving grace and the certainty of the life-changing Word. In Acts 4:20, when the authorities attempted to silence his voice, Peter proclaimed, "For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." Acts 5:42 adds, "And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ." When persecution broke upon the disciples, the record reveals that "those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word" (Acts 8:4).

The disciples had their differences. At times, there were misunderstandings and even conflict, but the disciples were united in Christ to proclaim a present-truth, prophetic message that the world so desperately needed to hear. Their unswerving, single-minded purpose was to accomplish God's mission. They had fellowshiped with the Savior, and His passion to "seek and save the lost" became their passion (see Luke 19:10). It was their commitment to Christ, His message, and His mission that kept

them focused on their task. Two classic statements in the book *The Acts of the Apostles* powerfully portray the purpose and focus of the early church.

> The church is God's appointed agency for the salvation of men. It was organized for service, and its mission is to carry the gospel to the world.[7]

> Putting away all differences, all desire for the supremacy, they came close together in Christian fellowship. They drew nearer and nearer to God, and as they did this they realized what a privilege had been theirs in being permitted to associate so closely with Christ. Sadness filled their hearts as they thought of how many times they had grieved Him by their slowness of comprehension, their failure to understand the lessons that, for their good, He was trying to teach them.
>
> These days of preparation were days of deep heart searching. The disciples felt their spiritual need and cried to the Lord for the holy unction that was to fit them for the work of soul saving. They did not ask for a blessing for themselves merely. They were weighted with the burden of the salvation of souls. They realized that the gospel was to be carried to the world, and they claimed the power that Christ had promised.[8]

The clear focus, the overriding purpose of the first-century church, was winning the lost to Christ. This one thing triumphed over personal ambition, the desire for supremacy and human strivings for position or power. They were willing to sacrifice

their cherished ambitions to maintain a unified focus on soul winning. The New Testament church was united in Christ with a passion for His passion—saving lost people. For them, church organization stimulated this unity by providing a structure to grow in the truth of His Word and foster the proclamation of the Word.

United in the centrality of His church

Throughout the New Testament, Jesus emphasized the divine nature of the church. When Peter confessed that Jesus was the divine Son of God, our Savior replied, "On this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). The church is not some human, bureaucratic, man-made institution. It is a divine movement raised up by God. Its purpose is to nurture and foster the spiritual life of each believer and equip each one to use his or her gifts in the proclamation of the gospel in a life of self-sacrificial service to others. The church is the "body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:27), "the flock of God" (1 Peter 5:2), the "pillar and ground of the truth,"[9] and "a holy temple."[10] It is "God's appointed agency for the salvation of men. It was organized for service, and its mission is to carry the gospel to the world."[11]

Church organization in a growing church

Christ organized the church Himself when He personally ordained the twelve disciples. The scriptural record states, "And he ordained twelve, that they should be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach" (Mark 3:13, 14, KJV). Ellen White leaves no doubt about the significance of this act when she states, "It was at the ordination of the Twelve that the first step was taken in the organization of the church that after

Christ's departure was to carry on His work on the earth."[12] It is fascinating to observe that the "first step" in this organizational process was the ordination of the twelve disciples, who then became the spiritual leaders of the early church. The ordination of the Twelve was a crucial step in Christ's plan for accomplishing heaven's mission to the world.

The church's organizational structure continued to grow and develop more fully in the early decades of Christianity. In the book of Acts, church organization is paramount to the unity of the church. Without organization false teachers could easily have hijacked the church's message and sidetracked its mission. Without church organization the biblical message of truth based on the Word of God would have been distorted and the mission of Christ diluted. Let's review church organization in the book of Acts and notice its function in nurturing the believer's spiritual life, preserving the church's message, and fostering its mission.

In Acts 1, a united group of 120 believers met in the upper room to pray for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (verses 14, 15). They were united in their love for Christ. They were committed to His teachings. Their hearts beat with an overwhelming desire to share His love with everyone they met. The record states that they were in "one accord" seeking God for the outpouring of His Spirit and power to reach the world (verses 8, 14).

A potential problem arose at the end of the chapter. The position vacated by Judas's betrayal and death needed to be filled. The early church considered two of their number as possibilities. This could have been problematic. These New Testament believers could easily have taken sides with hardened positions on the name they thought was God's will for the

position. They mutually agreed to seek God's wisdom on the matter (verse 24).

The fact that they chose two and were only going to select one indicates that there were differences of opinion among the group. This experience of selecting one over the other could easily have divided the church, but the disciples agreed on a process of discerning God's will and also agreed to accept the outcome. They were willing to surrender their own convictions to the revealed will of Christ through the selection process. Even in its embryonic stage, the church was learning lessons of submission for the sake of unity and mission.

In Acts 2, 3,000 people were baptized on the Day of Pentecost. They united with the church and continued steadfastly in the apostle's doctrine, fellowship, and prayers (verse 41). Those baptized became part of an organized movement. They were taught the "apostles doctrine," enjoyed the believers "fellowship," and joined in the congregation's "prayers."

According to Acts 6, the church faced new challenges as it grew. The Greek widows were not receiving their fair proportion in the food distribution. Once again there was open discussion and a mutually agreed-upon solution. A representative group of deacons was chosen. These deacons ministered to the needy Greek widows and maintained the unity of the church in a time of crises. They were chosen because they had "good reputations," were "full of the Holy Spirit," and were guided by divine "wisdom" (Acts 6:3). At each step of its development, the early church refined its organizational structure for the sake of nurturing the growing church, safeguarding its teachings, and fostering its mission.

Acts 9 records the conversion of the apostle Paul. Immediately upon his Damascus Road conversion, the Holy Spirit led

him to Ananias, a representative of the church. The Spirit did not at this juncture lead him into the wilderness to spend time alone, neither did the Spirit send him out immediately on an evangelistic mission. He was brought into contact with a representative of God's church. One reason for this is to illustrate the importance of church organization and authority. In the book *Acts of the Apostles*, Ellen White puts it this way, "Thus Jesus gave sanction to the authority of His organized church and placed Paul in connection with His appointed agencies on earth."[13] Paul was nurtured in his faith by Ananias and further taught about God's plan of church organization.

In Acts 15, the New Testament church faced a critical juncture in its development. A conflict arose over how Gentile believers who now had accepted Christ should relate to Jewish customs, especially circumcision. This was no little matter. Jewish believers had practiced circumcision for millennia; it was part of their identity and deeply imbedded in their culture. Consequently, Paul and Barnabas had "no small dissension and dispute" with these Jewish leaders (Acts 15:2). They mutually agreed to refer the matter to the Jerusalem Council. The Jerusalem Council had the authority to make a decision that not everyone was pleased with but the majority of the church accepted. Its decision was accepted by the church at large and brought unity to the body of believers.

Unity came as individuals surrendered to the authority of the larger body. My point here is not the decision that was made but the process by which it was made. A complex issue was brought from the local church to a larger administrative body. Both the leadership and membership agreed to accept the decision of the Jerusalem Council. Writing with prophetic insight, Ellen White describes the authority vested in the Jerusalem Council in these

poignant words: "Meanwhile all controversy was to cease until a final decision should be given in general council. This decision was then to be universally accepted by the different churches throughout the country."[14] A very difficult issue that was troubling Christianity was settled by the willingness of both sides to accept the decision of the Jerusalem Council. People had convictions on both sides of this question, but most were willing to accept the decision of a representative body of leaders for the sake of God's mission.

This general meeting of believers with delegates from varying churches brought unity to the body of Christ, and once again they focused on what is the most important thing on God's heart—the saving of lost people. Think of what could have happened if the rest of the book of Acts was spent discussing the varying sides of a debate over circumcision for Gentile converts to Christianity. Imagine the tragic impact on the growth of the church an endless debate on this matter would have had. Wisely, the New Testament church accepted the decision of the larger body—the general council of the church—and passionately moved on with mission.

In Acts 20:17–32, the apostle Paul instructed the elders of the church on both building up and safeguarding the flock of God. He counseled them that one of the functions of church organization and an ordained ministry was to protect the church from false teachers and keep it focused on mission. Once again he emphasized the importance of church organization and its relation to both building the faith of the church members and protecting them from false teachers.

Paul's letters to Ephesus, Philippi, and Colossae and his counsel to Timothy and Titus indicate a cohesive organizational structure with elders, deacons, and deaconesses. A financial

sharing plan emerges as Paul takes an offering for the suffering believers in Jerusalem and encourages that "those who preach the gospel shall live from the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:14).

Church organization: An essential element of unity

The New Testament church was unified in its commitment to Christ and His present-truth, prophetic message, mission to the world, and divinely established church organization. We are on a very slippery slope if personal opinions or preferences are placed over and against the authority of Christ's organized church. Ellen White states it clearly: "Oh, how Satan would rejoice if he could succeed in his efforts to get in among this people and disorganize the work at a time when thorough organization is essential and will be the greatest power to keep out spurious uprisings and to refute claims not endorsed by the word of God! We want to hold the lines evenly, that there shall be no breaking down of the system of organization and order that has been built up by wise, careful labor."[15]

Church organization and its subsequent policies based on biblical principles play an indispensable role in unifying Christ's church. Rather than being arbitrary decrees by authoritarian leaders, the church's policies are mutual agreements based on trust. They outline how the church functions. They are developed by a broad base of representative leadership. The church's policies are not infallible. They can change—and sometimes do—but they represent the best judgment of a representative group of leaders at a given period of time. They are agreements guided by the Holy Spirit to determine the best way forward for the church. They are not to be equated with salvation or timeless biblical truths, but they are one of the cohesive elements that holds the church together.

Policies: Mutual agreements based on trust

For example, the Bible is clear in its teaching of the tithing principle, but it does not delineate tithe percentages to varying entities from the local church to the conference, union, and division. These decisions are made by committees. What would happen if each church or local conference decided for itself how much of its tithe to retain and how much to pass on to the union conference or division? The church would have a financial disaster. Its ability to function as a world body would be severely curtailed.

Here is another example. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has twenty-eight fundamental beliefs. Why not twenty-five or thirty? Who determines that there are only twenty-eight fundamental beliefs? The Bible does not specify or enumerate exactly twenty-eight. In fact, the twenty-eighth fundamental belief was added to the church's list of fundamentals only recently. What if each local field determined the fundamental beliefs they thought were appropriate to their culture and territory and left the others out? The issue here is not the biblical truth of the fundamental belief, but the determination of what a fundamental belief is and how many to include. This is a decision of responsible church leadership mutually agreed upon by the General Conference in session.

When we differ

The Scriptures are a revelation of God's eternal, unchanging, authoritative truths. In the development of policy, the principles of Scripture guide the church, and the role of church leadership is always to be faithful to this sacred trust. There will be some issues where honest people see things differently. In these instances, the gospel invites us to treat one another with respect

and dignity. But this one thing is clear: the gospel also demands that we place a high priority on the unity of the church and respect the decisions of the corporate body. The unity of the church is near to the heart of God, and the organization of the church is a central truth in the New Testament.

Without church organization, we would quickly have a congregational system of theological pluralism, weakened mission, and organizational chaos. Ellen White echo's this critical thought: "God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have authority."[16] The unity of the church is a clear, unequivocal, biblical doctrine. To disregard or minimize the corporate decisions of representatives of the world church creates disunity and pains the heart of God.

The unity of the church is maintained when our commitment to Christ is foremost; when we are united in the truths of Scripture through the guidance of the Holy Spirit; when we place priority on mission and are moved by what moves the heart of God, and when the mutual agreements or policies of the church serve as the foundation for a system of church governance and authority. To neglect any one of these four aspects of unity is to invite disunity, a dismantling of biblical truth, and a distortion of mission. To downplay church organization or authority is to leave the church in disarray and fundamentally erode its mission.

May we be filled with the Spirit of Christ, proclaiming the message of Christ, fulfilling the mission of Christ, and upholding the church of Christ. Then, and only then, will the church arise to fulfill its destiny and reveal the glory of God to a waiting world and a watching universe.

1. Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1911), 90, 91.
2. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 28.
3. A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 100.
4. Charles H. Spurgeon, "The Essence of Separation," quoted in *The Berean Call*, July 1992, 4.
5. Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald®, 1892), 391.
6. Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald®, 1958), 204.
7. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 9.
8. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 37.
9. Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald®, 1941), 54.
10. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 275.
11. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 9.
12. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 18.
13. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 122.
14. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 190.
15. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1948), 9:257, 258.
16. White, *Testimonies*, 9:261.

A message that is urgent,
eternal, and universal
must be incredibly
relevant and important
for an end-time
generation.

TWO

Revelation's End-Time Message

Many years ago, H. M. S. Richards Sr. was attending a ministerial convention with a large group of Protestant ministers. One evening as they were sitting around the table talking, one of these pastors made this interesting observation: "It is too bad the book of Revelation is in the Bible. You know, if we did not have the book of Revelation, we would not be troubled by those heretical Seventh-day Adventists." Of course, the group had a hearty laugh without realizing Pastor Richards was a Seventh-day Adventist.

Commenting on this experience years later, Elder Richards said, "In a sense the preacher was right—not that it is too bad the book of Revelation is in the Bible—but in a special sense

Revelation does outline the prophetic rise and message of God's people today."

The Revelation of Jesus Christ is the DNA of God's last-day church. It is at the very foundation of who we are—it contains the very essence of Adventist identity. The idea of what identifies a movement, a people group, or a church is a fascinating study. Take our Jewish friends, for example.

Jewish identity

Twice a day, in the morning and evening, Jewish families repeat this verse: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4). Throughout the centuries of their exile, this chanting of the Shema—their confession of faith—reminded Jews of the spiritual vision and path that united them as a people. It also strengthened Israel's resolve to resist the various attempts to force them to abandon that spiritual vision and path. So important is the Shema that Deuteronomy 6:4 is one of the first verses that a Jewish child is taught as soon as he or she learns to speak; Jewish mothers teach their young children to chant the Shema before going to sleep.

After the Holocaust, some leading rabbis visited Catholic orphanages in order to search for Jewish children. During the Holocaust, some Jewish parents in Europe had placed their children in these orphanages in order to save their lives. It was the hope of these parents that they would later be reunited with their children, and that if they—the parents—did not survive, they hoped that surviving relatives or friends would find their children and raise them.

After the war, most of the priests and nuns who operated these orphanages were not willing to release the Jewish children and allow them to return to their people. They would

often deny that they had any Jewish children. During one such visit, a leading rabbi asked the priest in charge of the orphanage to allow him to return in the evening when the children were going to sleep. The priest reluctantly agreed to the rabbi's request. When the rabbi returned, he entered the children's room; and as he walked through the aisles of beds, he chanted the Hebrew words of the Shema. One by one, children burst into tears and cried out, "Mama!" Many repeated the words of the Shema.

The priests had taught the children about Christianity, but they were unable to erase these children's memories of their Jewish mothers putting them to bed every night with the Shema on their lips. The head priest had no choice but to admit that he was "mistaken"; thus, these lost children of Israel were able to return to their people and to their Torah.

The Shema is the hallmark of Judaism. It speaks of the identity of a people. Seventh-day Adventists in a sense have their Shema—their biblical passage of identity.

Identifying God's people today

Four specific chapters in Revelation describe in detail varying aspects of God's people today. In the message to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3, Jesus' counsel to Laodicea reveals the spiritual condition of the true church. In Revelation 10, Jesus describes the miraculous prophetic rise of the true church. In Revelation 12, our Lord describes the characteristics of the true church; and in Revelation 14, He reveals the message of the true church.

The focus of these pages is the enduring relevance of the three angels' messages for people living in the twenty-first century. Here are the fundamental questions we will attempt to answer:

- Are the three angels' messages the product of a nineteenth-century mentality with little meaning for a twenty-first-century generation?
- Do the three angels' messages have any relevance to a postmodern people?
- What practical meaning do these messages have for our lives today?
- Do the messages make any difference at all in the way we think and live?

Here are two fascinating statements by Ellen White that guide our understanding of the importance of these messages to the end of time:

> In a special sense Seventh-day Adventists have been set in the world as watchmen and light-bearers. To them has been entrusted the last warning for a perishing world. On them is shining wonderful light from the Word of God. They have been given a work of the most solemn import,—the proclamation of the first, second, and third angels' messages. There is no other work of so great importance. They are to allow nothing else to absorb their attention.[1]

> The theme of greatest importance is the third angel's message, embracing the messages of the first and second angels. All should understand the truths contained in these messages and demonstrate them in daily life, for this is essential to salvation. We shall have to study earnestly, prayerfully, in order to understand these grand truths.[2]

Notice the latter statement carefully. The prophet of God makes four significant points:

1. The three angels' messages are of greatest importance.
2. An understanding of these messages affects our daily life.
3. These messages are essential to salvation.
4. We shall have to study both earnestly and prayerfully to understand these great truths.

This statement seems to imply that there are gems of truth hidden within these messages that are life transforming. Ellen White's emphasis here is more on the impact of the three angels' messages on our daily lives rather than on merely a cognitive understanding of some abstract truth. Could it be that the message of Revelation 14 is especially designed by God for an end-time generation? Is it possible that the messages of the three angels are uniquely designed by God to meet the special needs of twenty-first-century postmoderns? Let's begin our journey by taking a brief look at postmodern thought and then turn to Revelation 14 to study the first angel's message.

Postmodern thought summarized

Postmodernism is composed of several assumptions. Let's examine each:

- Life is based on relationships. Belonging and a sense of identity with the larger community are far more important than believing a particular creed or doctrine.

- Each individual creates his or her own reality. There are no objective norms. Feelings of "rightness" or "an inner sense" of moral correctness guide all behavior.
- The essence of life is experienced in the context of a larger meta-narrative (i.e., story).
- Ideas of truth, reason, and knowledge give way to signs, experience, and feelings.
- There is a strong sense of justice and fairness. Tolerance, compassion, and equality are the new norm.
- There is a move away from materialism, capitalism, and consumerism as the essence of life's meaning. There is a strong interest by many postmodern people in health and a simpler life.
- Truth has much more to do with doing something right than getting something right. How you live and relate to others is far more important than what you think or believe.
- Since life is the product of biological chance, its meaning must be found within. The Bible and all other sacred writings provide stories of people seeking for meaning and purpose rather than objective truth.

There is a great deal that is commendable in postmodern thought, but taking the preceding ideas to their logical conclusions is perilous for one who takes the Word of God seriously. Here is one thing to keep in mind: the postmodern mind is open to new ideas, and the message of the three angels—rightly presented—speaks to the heart needs of the twenty-first-century, postmodern generation as it does to each of our own heart needs.

Let's examine the relevance of heaven's message to this generation. Revelation 14 details Jesus' last-day message: "Then I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell upon the earth—to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people—saying with a loud voice, 'Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water' " (Revelation 14:6, 7).

Here is a message that is urgent—the angel is flying in midheaven—not static. It is eternal—the angel has the everlasting gospel. And it is universal—it is to be proclaimed to every person on earth. A message that is urgent, eternal, and universal must be incredibly relevant and important for an end-time generation.

The eternal gospel

The phrase *everlasting gospel* speaks of the past, present, and future. When God created humankind with the capacity to make moral choices, He anticipated that they would make errant choices. Once His creatures had the capacity to choose, they had the capacity to rebel against His loving nature. The plan of salvation was conceived in the mind of God before our first parents' rebellion in Eden (Revelation 13:8). As Ellen White explains, "The plan for our redemption was not an afterthought, a plan formulated after the fall of Adam. It was a revelation of 'the mystery which hath been kept in silence through times eternal.' Romans 16:25, R. V. It was an unfolding of the principles that from eternal ages have been the foundation of God's throne."[3]

The phrase *everlasting gospel* speaks of a God who loves the beings He created so much that although He fully knew the

consequences of their choices, He made provision for their eventual rebellion even before it happened.

There is another sense in which the gospel is eternal. To a generation starving for genuine love and longing for meaningful relationships, the gospel speaks of acceptance, forgiveness, belonging, grace, and life-changing power. It speaks of a God of unconditional love who cares so deeply that He will go to any length to redeem us, because He wants us with Him forever.

The eternal gospel speaks not only of the past and present, but it is the basis of a future full of hope. It speaks of living eternally with the One whose heart is aching to be with us forever. The gospel speaks of an eternal relationship with the Christ who created us and redeemed us so that we could live with Him through the ceaseless ages of eternity.

Into all the world

According to the urgent, end-time message of the first of the three angels, the everlasting gospel is to be proclaimed to "every nation, tribe, tongue, and people" (Revelation 14:6). Here is a mission so grand, so large, so comprehensive that it is all-consuming. It demands our best efforts and requires our total commitment. It leads us from a preoccupation with our own self-interest to a passion for Christ's service. It inspires us with something larger than ourselves and leads us out of the narrow confines our own minds to a grander vision. Our faith in what the Holy Spirit will accomplish through our consecrated efforts leads us to grasp Christ's promise: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14).

In an interview about his book *A Quest for More*, Paul David Tripp discusses the psychological need of every human being to be part of something larger than himself or herself. He states it this way:

> Human beings were created to be part of something bigger than their own lives. Sin causes us to shrink our lives down to the size of our lives. The grace of Christ is given to rescue us from the claustrophobic confines of our own little self-focused kingdom and frees us to live for the eternal purposes and satisfying delights of the Kingdom of God. . . .
>
> We live in a culture that has institutionalized self-focus and personal entitlement. If you look around, it is very clear that we need to be rescued from ourselves. Things like debt, addiction, obesity, divorce, etc. are the fruits of a culture of self-focus, where we look for meaning where meaning cannot be found. There is freedom to be found in living for something bigger than yourself. . . .
>
> Ultimately it means living for the glory of God and the success of his agenda for the world he made.[4]

There is nothing more inspiring, more fulfilling, more rewarding, than being part of a divine movement providentially raised up by God to accomplish a task far bigger, far larger, than any one human being could ever accomplish on their own. The commission given by God, described in Revelation 14, is the greatest task ever committed to His church. It is an earnest appeal to give our lives to heaven's grandest task.

The aged apostle John, a prisoner on Patmos, continued his

urgent end-time appeal in Revelation 14:7 by declaring that the angel says "with a loud voice, 'Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water.' "

Let's meditate for a few moments on the expression "fear God and give glory to Him." The Greek word John uses in verse 7 for *fear* is *phobeo*. It is used here not in the sense of being afraid of God but in the sense of reverence, awe, and respect. It conveys the thought of absolute loyalty and a full surrender to God's will. It is an attitude of mind that is God-centered rather than self-centered. It is the opposite of Lucifer's attitude in Isaiah 14:13, 14, when he says in his heart:

> I will ascend into heaven,
> I will exalt my throne above the stars of God;
> I will also sit on the mount of the congregation
> On the farthest sides of the north;
> I will ascend above the heights of the clouds,
> I will be like the Most High.

The essence of the great controversy revolves around submission to God. Lucifer was self-centered. He refused to submit to any authority except his own. Rather than submit to the One upon the throne, Lucifer desired to rule from the throne.

The first angel's message calls us to make God the center of our lives. In an age of materialism and consumerism, when secular values have made self the center, heaven's appeal is to turn from the tyranny of self-centeredness and the bondage of self-inflated importance to place God at the center of our lives. For some, money is the center of their lives; for others, it is pleasure or power. For some, it may be sports, music, or

entertainment. Revelation's message is a clarion call to fear—to respect, to honor—God as life's true center. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matthew 6:33). Paul echoes this earnest appeal with these words: "Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth" (Colossians 3:2).

Giving glory to God

Notice this contrast: fearing God speaks of our *attitudes*; giving glory to God speaks of our *actions*. Fearing God has to do with what we think. Giving glory to God has to do with what we do. Fearing God deals with an inner commitment to make God the center of our life. Giving glory to God deals with how our inner convictions translate into a lifestyle that honors God in everything we do.

In his urgent appeal to the church at Corinth, the apostle Paul explains what it means to give glory to God: "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). When God is the center of our life, our one desire is to give glory to Him in every aspect of our life, whether that has to do with our diet and the things we eat, our dress and the things we wear, our entertainment and the things we view, or our music and the things we listen to. We give glory to God as we reveal His character of love to the world through lives committed to doing His will. This is all the more important in the light of earth's final end-time judgment.

An end-time judgment

Our passage continues, "Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come" (Revelation 14:7). The

issues in the great controversy between good and evil will be settled forever. The universe will finally see that God is both merciful and just. He is both loving and righteous. He is both compassionate and fair. The judgment reveals that God has done everything He possibly can to save every human being. It reveals before a waiting world and a watching universe that God will go to any lengths to save us. There is nothing more that He could have done to redeem us. The judgment sweeps the curtain aside and reveals the cosmic drama in the great controversy. It reveals God's character of self-sacrificing love in contrast to Satan's selfish ambition.

Revelation 14:7 is a divine commentary on Daniel 7:9–11, 13, and 14. In these verses, the prophet Daniel envisions a cosmic judgment scene in the heavenly sanctuary. Heavenly beings gather around God's throne. The scene grips the attention of the universe. God's justice and righteousness are on trial. Is He both just and loving? The honor of His throne is at stake. His reputation is on trial before heavenly beings. Satan has impugned God's character.

The prophet Daniel states,

> A thousand thousands ministered to Him;
> Ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him.
> The court was seated [the judgment was set],
> And the books were opened
> (Daniel 7:10).

Ellen White adds these insightful thoughts:

> The sanctuary in heaven is the very center of Christ's work in behalf of men. It concerns every soul living

> upon the earth. It opens to view the plan of redemption, bringing us down to the very close of time and revealing the triumphant issue of the contest between righteousness and sin. It is of the utmost importance that all should thoroughly investigate these subjects and be able to give an answer to everyone that asketh them a reason of the hope that is in them.
>
> The intercession of Christ in man's behalf in the sanctuary above is as essential to the plan of salvation as was His death upon the cross.[5]

In the judgment, all wrongs will be made right. Righteousness will triumph over evil. The powers of hell will be defeated. God's name will be vindicated. His character will be exonerated. Injustice will not have the last word; God will. All of life's unfairness will be gone forever. The entire universe will worship the One who loves them with an unfathomable love.

Worship the Creator

Revelation 14:7 ends with an appeal to "worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water." This is a clarion call to worship the Creator at a time when most of the scientific world and the religious world have accepted the theory of Darwinian evolution.

Creation speaks of our value in God's sight. It speaks of our worth to Him. We are not alone in the universe. We are not simply some speck of cosmic dust. God created us. He fashioned us. He made us. We did not evolve. We are not a genetic accident. Jesus is worthy of our worship, because He both created us and redeemed us. Creation is at the heart of all true worship. This is why the Sabbath is so significant. The

Sabbath speaks of a Creator's care and a Redeemer's love. It reminds us that we are not cosmic orphans on some spinning globe of rock. It points us to a Creator who created us with a purpose and loved us too much to abandon us when we drifted from that purpose.

The Sabbath reminds us of the One who has provided us with all the good things of life. The Sabbath is an eternal symbol of our rest in Him. Rather than an arbitrary legalistic requirement, it reveals that true rest from righteousness by works is found in Him. The Sabbath speaks of a God who has achieved so that we can rest in His achievements. As Ellen White so eloquently puts it, the three angels' messages are righteousness by faith in all of its fullness and beauty:

> The exceeding great and precious promises given us in the Holy Scriptures have been lost sight of to a great extent, just as the enemy of all righteousness designed that they should be. He has cast his own dark shadow between us and our God, that we may not see the true character of God. The Lord has proclaimed Himself to be "merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth."
>
> Several have written to me, inquiring if the message of justification by faith is the third angel's message, and I have answered, "It is the third angel's message in verity."[6]

True Sabbath rest is the rest of grace in the loving arms of the One who created us, the One who redeemed us, and the One who is coming again for us. It is the eternal link between the past perfection of Eden and the future glory of the new

heavens and the new earth. The three angels' messages present the gospel in an end-time setting that meets the heart needs of a postmodern generation desperate for belonging, identity, community, purpose, fairness, justice, compassion, and worth. They are identifying marks of God's last-day people. They are signs of the remnant. One of the reasons I so deeply believe in the triumph of the church is because there is no other movement on earth proclaiming the message of the three angels except Seventh-day Adventists. If I were to leave the church, where would I go? Certainly not to the confusion of Babylon. The second angel's message shouts, "Babylon is fallen, is fallen" (Revelation 14:8).

Babylon's fall and the beast's mark

What is the meaning of the phrase *Babylon is fallen, is fallen* and the expression *the mark of the beast*? Although volumes have been written on these two topics, here is the essence of their meaning: these expressions speak of self-centered arrogance and human pride rather than self-sacrificial love. In Daniel 4:30, the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, arrogantly boasts, "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built?"

Babylon represented the proud achievements of humanity. It was a symbol of human works, not God's grace. A symbol of human traditions, not God's commands. Babylon was a symbol of religious pride and arrogance. It substitutes the day of the sun for the Sabbath of the Lord.

At its very heart, the mark of the beast exalts the human above the divine. It places humankind's word above God's Word. It results in replacing the commandments of God with human decrees. It leads to giving glory to humans rather than God. Sunday becomes the symbol of a human system of religion based

on human tradition rather than a divine command. Eventually, at a time of economic crisis, natural disasters, political turmoil, and social chaos, there will be formed a church-state alliance that restrict religious liberty and mandate worship on the first day of the week. These decrees will be enforced by an economic boycott and eventually a death decree.

God's last-day message comes to a climax in Revelation 14, where the apostle John in prophetic vision describes a group of grace-filled, end-time believers who "keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (verse 12). Rather than worship the beast, God's faith-filled people keep His commandments.

Saved by grace, these believers' hearts are filled with the faith of Jesus. His faith motivates and changes them. It inspires and empowers them. It frees them from the guilt of the past, delivers them from the bondage of sin in the present, and fills their hearts with hope for the future. Saved by grace, they can do nothing else but through His power give Him their allegiance and serve and obey Him forever.

Revelation's hope: Jesus is coming again

George Frederic Handel, the great musician, lost his health. His right side was paralyzed; his money was gone; and his creditors threatened to imprison him. Handel was so disheartened by his tragic experience that for a brief time he almost despaired. But he found new courage in three passages in Revelation. Let's read them:

1. *Revelation 11:15.* "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!"

2. *Revelation 19:6.* "And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, 'Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns!' "
3. *Revelation 17:14.* "He is Lord of lords and King of kings."

Handel was so inspired by these words that he composed *Messiah* in about twenty-one days in the summer of 1741. When he got to the "Hallelujah Chorus," his assistant found him in tears saying, "I did think I saw heaven open and saw the very face of God." There is no greater joy, no greater hope, no greater assurance that this: Jesus, King of kings and Lord of lords, has triumphed over the powers of hell and is victorious.

Although evil seems so strong, wickedness so great, and sin so powerful, the Faithful and True Witness, the Firstborn from the dead, the resurrected Christ, the Ruler over the kings of the earth, the King of kings, is really, truly coming again, and we will live with Him forever! This is the Seventh-day Adventist Church at its best, proclaiming the hope-filled message of Jesus' soon return, preparing a world for His second coming. Seventh-day Adventists have a unique end-time message to proclaim to the world. The three angels' messages will spread rapidly to every people group in the world. The work of God on earth will be finished, and Jesus will soon return. God's church will be empowered by the Holy Spirit to accomplish His mission of proclaiming the gospel to the ends of the earth.

1. Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald®, 1946), 119.

2. Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (Nashville: Southern Publishing, 1946), 29.

3. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1940), 22.

4. "Living for Something Bigger Than Yourself," CBN, accessed February 21, 2019, http://www1.cbn.com/books/living-for-something-bigger-than-yourself.

5. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1911), 488, 489.

6. Ellen G. White, "Repentance the Gift of God," *Review and Herald*, April 1, 1890.

Unless our minds are saturated with the truths of God's Word, we will be shaken out at the end time. . . . It is our defense against human tradition and man-made teachings.

THREE

Every Wind of Doctrine

Today, the Seventh-day Adventist Church is facing its greatest opportunities but also its greatest challenges. Since the devil knows that a united church focused on reaching the entire world with the gospel in the light of the three angels' messages will usher in the return of our Lord, he will do everything in his power to hinder the forward progress of the proclamation of truth. Whether it is false ideas about the trinity; an emphasis on the feasts; a mistaken understanding of contemplative prayer and Christian meditation; the emerging church; debates about Creation, the sanctuary, the remnant; or a reapplication of the time prophecies of Daniel and Revelation and setting dates for the return of Jesus, the devil will use all of his cunning to

counteract God's end-time mission. While truth can take only one form, error can take many. In this chapter, we will examine a few of Satan's strategies to deceive God's people—and how to detect them.

False teachings should not surprise us

Paul predicted false teachings would enter the New Testament church in the first century (see Acts 20:28–30). He also counseled young Timothy that in the last days of earth's history spurious teachings would enter the church (see 1 Timothy 4:1).

In Ephesians 4:14, the apostle uses the expression "every wind of doctrine" to describe the widespread nature and the varying heresies that will enter God's church at the end time. Ellen White quotes Ephesians 4 and uses the expression "every wind of doctrine" in a powerful article. I have quoted extensively from that article so you can get its full context:

> Already the judgments of God are abroad in the land, as seen in storms, in floods, in tempests, in earthquakes, in perils by land and by sea. The great I AM is speaking to those who make void his law. When God's wrath is poured out upon the earth, who will then be able to stand? Now is the time for God's people to show themselves true to principle. When the religion of Christ is most held in contempt, when his law is most despised, then should our zeal be the warmest and our courage the most unflinching. To stand in defense of truth and righteousness when the majority forsake us, to fight the battles of the Lord when champions are few,—this will be our test. At this time we must gather warmth from the coldness

of others, courage from their cowardice, and loyalty from their treason. The nation will be on the side of the great rebel leader.

The days of purification of the church are hastening on apace. God will have a people pure and true. In the mighty sifting soon to take place, we shall be better able to measure the strength of Israel. The signs reveal that the time is near when the Lord will manifest that his fan is in his hand, and that he soon will thoroughly purge his floor.

The days are fast approaching when there will be great perplexity and confusion. Satan, clothed in angel robes, will deceive, if possible, the very elect. There will be gods many and lords many. Every wind of doctrine will be blowing.[1]

One of the agencies that Satan will use quite effectively just before the return of our Lord will be false teachings. As these false teachings enter the church they accomplish at least four of the devil's purposes:

1. Heresy often minimizes the significance of the three angels' messages and the uniqueness of heaven's last-day message.
2. Heresy effectively hinders mission. The unity undergirding mission suffers in the context of doctrinal controversy.
3. Heresy undermines the authority of the church and casts dispersion on leadership.
4. Heresy shakes out of the church many people who are deceived by its falsehoods.

The Adventist Church affected by false teachings

The book of Hebrews reveals that a mighty shaking is coming on God's church. It describes the shaking this way:

> Now this, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken, as of things that are made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain.
>
> Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear (Hebrews 12:27, 28).

Here is a critical point to understand. The ones who are shaken are shaken *out*. The faithful remain. The reason we are not interested in any offshoot movements is because they do not remain. They veer off. Throughout history God has always called out His faithful to form a new movement. He did this at the time of Abraham, at the Exodus, in New Testament Christianity, in the Reformation, and at the time of the first Advent movement. In the last days of earth's history, a great shaking will come to the church. The remnant will remain while the unfaithful will be shaken out.

Heresy, or false teachings, will be one of the agencies God uses to cause the shaking. Ellen White writes that "when the shaking comes, by the introduction of false theories, these surface readers, anchored nowhere, are like shifting sand. They slide into any position to suit the tenor of their feelings of bitterness."[2]

Ellen White goes to describe Satan's efforts against God's church:

> Satan has made his boast of what he can do. He thinks to dissolve the unity which Christ prayed might exist in His church. He says, "I will go forth and be a lying spirit to deceive those that I can, to criticize, and condemn, and falsify." Let the son of deceit and false witness be entertained by a church that has had great light, great evidence, and that church will discard the message the Lord has sent and receive the most unreasonable assertions and false suppositions and false theories. Satan laughs at their folly, for he knows what truth is.
>
> Many will stand in our pulpits with the torch of false prophecy in their hands, kindled from the hellish torch of Satan.[3]

Unless our minds are saturated with the truths of God's Word, we will be shaken out at the end time. The truth of Scripture is our defense against the wiles of the devil. It is our safeguard against heresy. It is our defense against human tradition and man-made teachings. Jesus stated it clearly when He said, "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth" (John 17:17). David adds, "Forever, O LORD, Your word is settled in heaven. Your faithfulness endures to all generations" (Psalm 119:89, 90). When we come to God's Word with honest hearts seeking to do His will, His Holy Spirit will be our Teacher, and we need not be deceived by the devil's lies.

The Word of God is our anchor in the coming time of trouble. It is our shelter in the time of storm. Paul admonishes the church at Ephesus to "no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting" (Ephesians

4:14). As we study God's Word, Jesus will take us through every stormy wind that blows against His church. The following paragraphs describe just a few of the winds that have begun to blow.

Dust storms of doubt

Have you ever been in a dust storm, with the wind blowing fiercely across the prairies? Dust storms obscure vision. They make staying on the right road nearly impossible. They create confusion and make decision-making difficult. If the devil can persuade us to doubt God's Word or question His revealed will, he knows we are on the pathway to apostasy. Satan's first attack in Eden was to insinuate doubt in God. He approached Eve with the words, "Has God indeed said . . . ?" (Genesis 3:1). Satan deceived Eve by insinuating doubt regarding the Word and will of God.

The evil one attempted to use the same strategy on Jesus in the wilderness. He tempted Jesus with these words, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread" (Matthew 4:3). At His baptism, His Father had already declared that Jesus was the Son of God. If He had listened to the insinuations of Satan, Jesus would have doubted His Father's clear declaration that He was the Son of God. Christ's temptation in the wilderness was to doubt what God said. Ellen White describes that first temptation in these words:

> Though he appears as an angel of light, these first words betray his character. "If Thou be the Son of God." Here is the insinuation of distrust. Should Jesus do what Satan suggests, it would be an acceptance of the doubt. The tempter plans to overthrow Christ by the same means that were so successful with the

> human race in the beginning. How artfully had Satan approached Eve in Eden! "Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?" Genesis 3:1. Thus far the tempter's words were truth; but in his manner of speaking them there was a disguised contempt for the words of God. There was a covert negative, a doubt of the divine truthfulness. Satan sought to instill into the mind of Eve the thought that God would not do as He had said; that the withholding of such beautiful fruit was a contradiction of His love and compassion for man.[4]

The difference between Adam and Eve's fall in Eden and Jesus' triumph in the wilderness is precisely on this point. They doubted God and questioned His authority. Jesus trusted God's Word and accepted His absolute authority. The devil will attempt to get God's people to doubt today. When we begin to doubt the truthfulness of God's Word on any point—the authority of Scripture, Creation, the divinity of Christ, prophetic interpretation, the sanctuary message, the concept of the remnant, or any of the other distinctive teachings of Scripture—we will likely become confused in a dust storm of doubt.

Disease-laden breezes of heresy

Some diseases are airborne. The disease-laden breezes of heresy travel rapidly from one person to another, one church to another, causing spiritual disease and death and leaving conflict and division in their wake. The apostle Paul counseled Timothy about the heresy and false teachings of Hymenaeus and Philetus (see 2 Timothy 2:14–19). Commenting on this heresy, Ellen White gives us this counsel:

> We have encouragement in the Scriptures that if we walk humbly before God, we shall receive instruction. But we are warned against undue curiosity. "Shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness," leading into paths of supposition and imagination, with which we have nothing to do. These are vain, unessential theories of human creation, which keep the mind dwelling upon nothingness. They have in them nothing sure or substantial. Of those who advance these theories, Paul says: "Their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus; who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some."
>
> In the days of the apostles the most foolish heresies were presented as truth. History has been and will be repeated. There will always be those who, though apparently conscientious, will grasp at the shadow, preferring it to the substance. They take error in the place of truth because error is clothed with a new garment, which they think covers something wonderful. But let the covering be removed, and nothingness appears.[5]

The nature of this specific heresy in Paul's day had to do with the timing of the resurrection. Think about the different false teachings that are believed by some people today that have to do with the issue of timing. There are quite a few: the timing of Creation, the reapplication of time prophecies, the timing of the feast days, date setting for final events, and a host of others. Paul's counsel to the Ephesian elders speaks powerfully to us today:

> Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone day and night with tears.
>
> So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified (Acts 20:30–32).

Heresy will run rampant in the last days. Every wind of doctrine will be blowing. But Jesus, our loving Lord, will preserve us through His Word.

Fiery winds of fanaticism

Fanaticism is often based on an emotional type of religion that emphasizes feelings above God's Word. Signs and wonders become the essence of faith. Miracles become the sum of the religious experience and a sign of God's favor. The devil will use miracles, signs, and wonders in a powerful way to deceive many in the last days. Although miracles will be wrought when the Holy Spirit is poured out in latter-rain power, they never supersede the truth of God's Word (Matthew 24:24; Revelation 13:14; 16:14; 19:20). The Word of God is our guide—not signs, wonders, or miracles. Here is an amazing quote from God's messenger to the remnant: "Wonderful scenes, with which Satan will be closely connected, will soon take place. God's Word declares that Satan will work miracles. He will make people sick, and then will suddenly remove from them his satanic power. They will then be regarded as healed. These works of apparent healing will bring Seventh-day Adventists to the test."[6]

Fanaticism often begins with the substitution of human opinion for the Word of God: a drift from studying God's Word, an emphasis on experience over truth, and it can be ushered in by music styles that exalt human experience over divine revelation.[7] Ellen White further explains that "when the enemy sees that the Lord is blessing his people, and preparing them to discern his delusions, he will work with his masterly power to bring in fanaticism on one hand and cold formalism on the other, that he may gather in a harvest of souls. Now is the time to watch unceasingly. Watch for the first step of advance that Satan may make among us."[8]

Cold winds of formalism

Formalism often adds external requirements to God's Word, de-emphasizing salvation by faith (which transforms the life) and exchanging it for the externals of a self-imposed religious experience. As with the Pharisees of old, formalism fosters an attitude of spiritual pride that leads to judging others (see Matthew 7:1–5) and makes the person rough and unloving. Ellen White puts it this way: "A salvation which was purchased for humanity at such an infinite cost should be held in the most precious vessel by every believer. That which is of such value should ever be highly regarded and not cheapened and made common by the coarseness and roughness retained by those who receive the truth."[9]

Truth as it is in Jesus is not cold, lifeless, and formal. Truth is full of warmth, love, and compassion. One of the great evidences of the presence of Christ in one's life is the fruit of the Spirit. If we are unloving in our relationships, judgmental, and harsh in the name of Christ, we are doing more harm than good.

Criticism and condemnation that tear down individuals and the church, while preserving a formal facade of religion, are nothing more than heartless legalism. Ellen White hit the nail on the head when she wrote the following:

> The Lord Jesus, on the Mount of Olives, plainly stated that "because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold." He speaks of a class who has fallen from a high state of spirituality. Let such utterances as these come home with solemn, searching power to our hearts. Where is the fervor, the devotion to God that corresponds to the greatness of the truth which we claim to believe? The love of the world, the love of some darling sin, has weaned the heart from the love of prayer and of meditation on sacred things. A formal round of religious services is kept up; but where is the love of Jesus? Spirituality is dying. Is this torpor, this mournful deterioration, to be perpetuated? Is the lamp of truth to flicker and go out in darkness because it is not replenished by the oil of grace?[10]

The Holy Spirit produces the fruit of the Spirit. The devil produces the fruit of the flesh. The greatest evidence of Christianity is a loving and loveable Christian.

Gentle zephyrs of Laodiceanism

A zephyr is a gentle, warm breeze that that tends to lull one to sleep. Imagine sitting at the beach with an idyllic view, reading a book and nodding off in quiet repose with the gentle, warm breezes blowing. But behind those breezes can be stormy weather. A wonderful example of a gentle zephyr masking

imminent danger is found in Acts 27:9–38. The captain of the boat taking Paul as a prisoner to Rome did not listen to the counsel of the apostle, and according to Acts 27:13, "when the south wind blew softly, supposing that they had obtained their desire, putting out to sea, they sailed close by Crete." A storm was coming relentless in its fury, but the captain felt secure when the zephyrs blew softly. The boat was eventually destroyed in the fierce winds, and the sailors and all aboard escaped only by clinging to the broken pieces of the vessel. It is very easy to be lulled to sleep when things seem to be going well and the gentle breezes are blowing in your life.

The church at Laodicea was lulled to sleep in gentle, warm breezes of complacency. It was wealthy, educated, materialistic, and self-centered. Today, Laodiceans do not reject religion; they are simply not passionate about it. They do not reject Christ; they are simply not passionate about Him. They may talk about mission, but they do not participate in it. They are apathetic, lukewarm, and spiritually sleepy (see Revelation 3:14–22). "The work which the church has failed to do in a time of peace and prosperity she will have to do in a terrible crisis under most discouraging, forbidding circumstances," writes Ellen White. "The warnings that worldly conformity has silenced or withheld must be given under the fiercest opposition from enemies of the faith. And at that time the superficial, conservative class, whose influence has steadily retarded the progress of the work, will renounce the faith and take their stand with its avowed enemies, toward whom their sympathies have long been tending."[11]

Principles in detecting false teachings

False teachings often come in the form of so-called new truth. In every generation, there are always new truths that unfold as we

study Scripture. God's desire is that His church is ever learning, ever studying, ever growing. There is never a time that we can say we have arrived and that there is no more need for growth. In fact, we will be studying and learning more about divine things all through eternity. But new truth never undermines or discards old truth. Truth can be expanded on. It can be understood more clearly, but truth is truth whenever it is discovered. Any new revelation of doctrine will never be contrary to truths discovered in the past. When God reveals new truth, He reveals it to His church as His people study and pray together over passages of Scripture: "In every age there is a new development of truth, a message of God to the people of that generation. The old truths are all essential; new truth is not independent of the old, but an unfolding of it. It is only as the old truths are understood that we can comprehend the new. When Christ desired to open to His disciples the truth of His resurrection, He began 'at Moses and all the prophets.' "[12]

False teachings often involve a reapplication of time prophecies. There is a significant difference between the reapplication of prophecy and the fulfillment of prophecy. Bible prophecy is relevant in every age. Its principles guide each generation. In this sense, prophecy may have more than one application. When it comes to the apocalyptic fulfillment of prophecy, there is only one fulfillment. This is particularly true of the time prophecies of Daniel and Revelation. They are historical prophecies anchored in time. They have a beginning date and an ending date. Any attempt to reapply the 1,260 days (i.e., years) or the 2,300 days (i.e., years) to end-time events will end up in confused speculation. The time prophecies of the Bible came to a culmination at the end of the 2,300 years in 1844. Ellen White

makes this plain. Commenting on Revelation 10:7, the prophet of God makes this insightful statement: "This time, which the angel declares with a solemn oath, is not the end of this world's history, neither of probationary time, but of prophetic time, which should precede the advent of our Lord. That is, the people will not have another message upon definite time. After this period of time, reaching from 1842 to 1844, there can be no definite tracing of the prophetic time. The longest reckoning reaches to the autumn of 1844."[13]

The longest time prophecy of the Bible ran out in 1844. There are those who try to figure out elaborate time charts reapplying prophecy to calculate when Jesus will come. They are making a tragic mistake. Jesus waits for the development of faith-filled Christians who love Him enough to obey His commands and reveal His loving, self-sacrificing character to the world. He will pour His Spirit out on them so that "this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14).

False teachings often cast away confidence in established biblical truths. Just before the second coming of Jesus, Satan will attempt to make inroads into the remnant church by undermining confidence in the very foundation of the Adventist faith. He will work to undermine the uniqueness of the Adventist message. We can be incredibly thankful for the messages of the Spirit of Prophecy manifested in the writings of Ellen White. She has clearly warned us about what is coming:

> There is to be no change in the features of our work. It is to stand as clear and distinct as prophecy has made it. We are to enter into no confederacy with

> the world, supposing that by so doing we could accomplish more. If any stand in the way, to hinder the advancement of the work in the lines that God has appointed, they will displease God. No line of our faith that has made us what we are is to be weakened. We have the old landmarks of truth, experience, and duty; we are to stand firmly in defense of our principles, in full view of the world.[14]

> The enemy will bring in false theories, such as the doctrine that there is no sanctuary. This is one of the points on which there will be a departing from the faith. Where shall we find safety unless it be in the truths that the Lord has been giving for the last fifty years?[15]

> The very last deception of Satan will be to make of none effect the testimony of the Spirit of God. "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18). Satan will work ingeniously, in different ways and through different agencies, to unsettle the confidence of God's remnant people in the true testimony.[16]

False teachings often question church authority and organization. One of the issues that Seventh-day Adventists will face in the very near future is attempts to decentralize our organizational structure. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is a global movement with a global organizational structure and a global message and mission. According to the Spirit of Prophecy, there will be attempts to fragment Adventism by eroding this foundational

organizational structure: "The Lord has declared that the history of the past shall be rehearsed as we enter upon the closing work. Every truth that He has given for these last days is to be proclaimed to the world. Every pillar that He has established is to be strengthened. We cannot now step off the foundation that God has established. We cannot now enter into any new organization, for this would mean apostasy from the truth."[17]

How to keep from being deceived by the devil's last-day delusions

Understanding truth is a matter of the heart as well as the mind. Jesus outlines that understanding truth happens in the heart as well as in the mind in John 7:17: "If anyone wills to do [God's] will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God." The willingness to do whatever God says is a vital prerequisite in knowing truth. When our hearts burn with the desire to know Christ and do His will, His Holy Spirit guides us into all truth. Jesus was absolutely committed to pleasing the Father (see John 8:29). When we "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Matthew 6:33), we will be safe from the snares of the devil.

Understanding truth is a matter of knowing God's will as revealed in His Word. Jesus said, "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth" (John 17:17). Fill your mind with the Word of God. Let the Scriptures become your companion and your daily study. "None but those who have fortified the mind with the truths of the Bible will stand through the last great conflict."[18] The inspired Word of God exposes the deceptions of the devil and reveals the truth of God.

Understanding truth involves a willingness to stand for it when God reveals it, even if it is not the popular thing to do.

> Soon God's people will be tested by fiery trials, and the great proportion of those who now appear to be genuine and true will prove to be base metal.[19]

> When the religion of Christ is most held in contempt, when His law is most despised, then should our zeal be the warmest and our courage and firmness the most unflinching. To stand in defense of truth and righteousness when the majority forsake us, to fight the battles of the Lord when champions are few—this will be our test. At this time we must gather warmth from the coldness of others, courage from their cowardice, and loyalty from their treason.[20]

> As the storm approaches, a large class who have professed faith in the third angel's message, but have not been sanctified through obedience to the truth, abandon their position and join the ranks of the opposition.[21]

Understanding truth involves a willingness to accept the God-given authority of His church and a desire to unify in mission to reach the world.

> The church may appear as about to fall, but it does not fall. It remains, while the sinners in Zion will be sifted out—the chaff separated from the precious wheat. This is a terrible ordeal, but nevertheless it must take place.[22]

Although deceptions and falsehoods will come as they did in the early church, we are secure in Christ and kept by His Spirit through His Word. With Jesus' love filling our hearts and His Word saturating our minds, we are safe from the deceptive teachings of the evil one. Christ alone, revealed in His Word alone, is our refuge from every wind of doctrine. When the gale-force winds of deception are blowing, there is refuge in the One who is the hiding place in every storm (see Isaiah 32:1, 2).

From every stormy wind that blows,
From every swelling tide of woes,
There is a calm, a sure retreat;
'Tis found beneath the mercy seat.[23]

I believe in the church because Jesus is its Savior, Lord, and coming King. The Holy Spirit is its Teacher, Guide, and Instructor. And the Word of God is its foundation.

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[The church] is the object of God's supreme regard. He will right every wrong. He is building His church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

FOUR

The Church Triumphant

Since the late nineteenth century, Providence United Methodist Church has been known as "The Church Moved by the Hand of God." Although in the ensuing years the story of this "miracle" seems to have gotten the actual facts a little mixed up, no one can deny that the simple frame building at the rear of the present brick church seemed to be destined by fate. Somewhat frustrated when their efforts to obtain their chosen site on which to build a church were rebuffed by the landowner, Samuel R. Sadler, the group built on another lot in the village.[1]

> On September 16, 1876, as their new church was being dedicated, a hurricane hit the village. Reportedly, heavy rains and wind tide pushed in from the Pamlico Sound and flooded the town, until the village and surrounding area were filled with five feet of water. The winds were strong and relentless, and the new church building was floated off its brick pilings and began the journey which gives the story credence. The church traveled north and then east, eventually reaching the exact piece of property the congregation had earlier attempted to purchase. After turning itself around facing Main Street, the church settled onto this higher piece of ground and remained there. Title to the land was eventually obtained in 1881.[2]

Throughout the centuries, God's people have faced setbacks but never defeat. They have faced challenges, but they have never been forsaken. They have faced obstacles, but they have never been overcome. God's church has triumphed over the forces of hell and marched on victoriously. The Egyptians could not defeat God's truth in the days of Moses. The Babylonians could not crush the truth in the days of Daniel. The Persians could not obliterate the truth in the days of Esther. The Romans could not destroy the truth in the days of Paul. And Satan and all the angels of hell could not prevail against the truth in the days of Jesus. Throughout the centuries, in the face of ridicule, slander, oppression, and persecution, the people of God, the plan of God, and the purpose of God have not only survived, they have thrived.

Is the church man-made or Christ-made? Does Jesus have a church? Let's look at what Jesus Himself says on this point:

> When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?"
>
> So they said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."
>
> He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"
>
> Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."
>
> Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:13–18).

Caesarea Philippi was so named because Philip, a brother of Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee, rebuilt the city and named it after Tiberius Caesar and himself. The city was the center of Greek philosophy and home to Pan, the Greek god of pastures, flocks, forests, and wildlife. It was also a Roman city and stood as a symbol of Roman military might. And it was a Jewish city as well. The headwaters of the Jordon flowed from nearby mountains, and Caesarea Philippi was said to be the spring of Judaism. So when Jesus chose this setting to ask His disciples, "Who do men say that I am," He was masterfully setting Himself against the backdrop of Greek philosophy, Roman military might, and formal Jewish religion.

The disciples responded that some people were identifying Jesus with John the Baptist, others with Elijah or Jeremiah (verse 14). Then Jesus asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" (verse 15). This fundamental question is always personal. "Who

do *you* say that I am? What will *you* do with Jesus?"

When Peter gave his classic response, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (verse 16), Jesus said that this insight came not from a human source, but from God Himself (verse 17). Accepting Jesus Christ is always the result of a revelation by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus then went on to say, "On this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (verse 18). Jesus is the Rock. He is the foundation on which the church is established (see 1 Corinthians 10:4). Does Jesus have a church? Who built it? Jesus did.

Will the gates of hell prevail against Christ's church? Definitely not. Jesus is saying to His disciples and to us, "Some believe philosophy will change the world; others believe military might will change the world; still others have the idea that religion will change the world. But what I say to you is that My church, filled with My Holy Spirit and founded on the Word of God, will triumph over principalities and all the powers of hell." The church of Jesus Christ is the only earthly institution that will survive until the coming of our Lord. As Jesus said, "I will build My church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).

There are those today who specialize in criticizing the church. They emphasize its failures. They point their finger at its sins. They publish their diatribes against its so-called glaring faults. They major in its mistakes. Church leadership acknowledges that the church is not perfect. In some areas the high and holy standards of Jesus have been compromised. In many areas we could have done better—much, much better. We acknowledge the church is far from what Jesus wants it to be, but it is still the bride of Christ, whom He loves.

The apostle Paul wrote, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:25–27). Paul's words tell us at least three things about Christ and the church.

1. Christ loves the church.
2. Christ will sanctify the church.
3. Christ will present His church to Himself as a glorious church.

There are some who want to do the work of Christ by taking on the task of purifying the church. But Jesus has not called them to do what only He can accomplish. In a message to the General Conference leadership, Ellen White wrote:

> Dear Brethren of the General Conference,
>
> I testify to my brethren and sisters that the church of Christ, enfeebled and defective as it may be, is the only object on earth on which He bestows His supreme regard.[3]

Is the church enfeebled and lacking spiritual power at times? Yes. Is the church defective, complacent, apathetic, compromising? Yes. Has Christ cast it off? Never! It is the object of God's supreme regard. He will right every wrong. He is building His church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

There are even some who distance themselves from the

church because of what they believe is the apostasy within it. The prophet of God has a message for such people: "Very close and sacred is the relation between Christ and His church—He the bridegroom, and the church the bride; He the head, and the church the body. Connection with Christ, then, involves connection with His church."[4]

There are those who say, "I want to be connected to Jesus, but forget about the church." The church is the only organization that is so big its body is on earth and its head is in heaven. Union with Christ is nourished and sustained through union with His church. The church is the arena of God's grace especially designed by Christ to people spiritually.

What is the church?

The church is not simply the physical building. The church has to do with people. Church buildings have little value without the people who worship in them. When Jesus says, "I will build My church" (Matthew 16:18), He is talking not merely about physical buildings but about establishing His people in the faith. "You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). God wants every believer to be "built up" spiritually. Colossians 2:6, 7, adds, "As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him." And Jesus compared those who hear His teachings and follow them to a man building his house on a rock. Winds, storms, and floods come, yet the house stands firm (see Matthew 7:24). The gates of hell itself will not prevail against the believer who is "built up" in Christ through the Word of God. There is life-changing power in the Word of God to build up our faith. Ellen White wrote, "None but those

who have fortified the mind with the truths of the Bible will stand through the last great conflict."[5] We are built up through the Word of God. Our faith is nurtured through the Word of God. Our spiritual lives are sustained through the Word of God. The Word is the foundation of our faith. The Scriptures are the blocks and mortar of our spiritual life.

Let's take a look at three biblical images of the church and the specific lessons we can learn from these biblical images.

1. The temple of God: "You as living stones are being built up a spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:5). The image here is God's church as a temple with each member compared to a living stone to fit into this temple of truth. There are two things to notice here.

First, stones don't come polished, refined, and ready to fall into their places. They need some chiseling, some smoothing out, some refining. Do you find yourself at times with some rough edges that need knocked off? Do you sense you need some polishing and refining? Don't let that discourage you. God is preparing you as a living stone to fit in the temple of truth. Ellen White encourages us with these words: "God has been testing and proving you; how have you borne the test? You needed to be planed and polished, to have the rough and jagged points of your character removed, that you might become refined for the kingdom of heaven."[6]

Just as the workmen on the ancient Jewish temple quarried the stone, broke off the rough edges, refined the material, and polished it for its place in the temple, so God is building His church to reveal to the world the beauty of His character and the glory of His presence.

There is a second fascinating aspect of this temple imagery. As stones in the temple of God, we are indissolubly linked to every

other stone in the building that God has been building since the fall of our first parents. Describing this temple of truth that God has been building throughout the centuries, Ellen White observes:

> One after another the foremost of the builders fell by the hand of the enemy. Stephen was stoned; James was slain by the sword; Paul was beheaded; Peter was crucified; John was exiled. Yet the church grew. New workers took the place of those who fell, and stone after stone was added to the building. Thus slowly ascended the temple of the church of God.
>
> Centuries of fierce persecution followed the establishment of the Christian church, but there were never wanting men who counted the work of building God's temple dearer than life itself. . . .
>
> The enemy of righteousness left nothing undone in his effort to stop the work committed to the Lord's builders. But God "left not Himself without witness." Acts 14:17. Workers were raised up who ably defended the faith once delivered to the saints. History bears record to the fortitude and heroism of these men.[7]

One example of these heroes of faith who are living stones in the temple of God is W. H. Anderson, pioneer missionary to Africa from 1895 to 1944. Born in Indiana, Anderson graduated in 1895 from Battle Creek College, where he was converted. At the school he took a prominent part in the formation of the first student foreign mission band, and from early youth he felt a strong pull toward the mission field.

In 1895, several months before his graduation in absentia,

Anderson joined G. B. Tripp and Dr. A. S. Carmichael to form the party of missionaries who operated the first permanent Seventh-day Adventist mission for the people of Africa. (Before leaving the homeland, Anderson was married to Nora Haysmer.) Arriving in South Africa, the party proceeded by train to Mafeking and then spent six weeks traveling by ox wagon (the railroad had not yet been built) to the site of the Solusi Mission, near Bulawayo, in southern Rhodesia.

The Andersons, with the other workers at Solusi, had trying experiences. During the Matabele rebellion they had to evacuate Solusi and the following year spent several months in Bulawayo living in an ox cart. In 1898, they watched several of their group die of malaria and others leave the country. A second, larger party was likewise stricken with malaria, and in 1901, the Andersons were the only foreign workers left at Solusi.

In 1919, Anderson began pioneer work among the Bechuana people, through whose country he had passed nearly twenty-five years before en route to Solusi. In 1922, he opened work in Angola, and during the next eight years he established several mission stations.

When W. H. Anderson arrived in Southern Africa in 1895, there were almost no Seventh-day Adventists living there. Today we have 3.5 million Adventists in the Southern Africa–Indian Ocean Division with nearly 700,000 of these living in Zimbabwe.

With great sacrifice the temple of God is being built stone by stone, and we, too, are part of this heritage of the faithful, building the temple of God where we live in our cities, in our communities, and in our countries.[8]

Lesson 1: We have a glorious heritage. We are living stones built up in the royal temple of God.

2. The body of Christ: "Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually" (1 Corinthians 12:27). Come with me for a moment and gaze at Calvary. Let's suppose you were in the crowd that day. Would you think you were looking at a triumphant, victorious leader? Certainly not! Behold Christ with nails through His hands and feet, a crown of thorns on His head, and a spear wound in His side. He is no longer breathing. His heart has stopped beating. He has hung His head and died. For all practical purposes His life is over—but miracle of all miracles, on Sunday morning He rises!

The church is the body of Christ and, oppressed and battered, she will one day rise to her destiny. Resurrected by the power of the Spirit, she will triumph over all of the powers of hell at last. "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? . . . Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us" (Romans 8:31, 37).

Even in atheistic, communist Russia, the Word of God has triumphed.

> [Many years ago, Russian] matinee idol Alexander Rostovzev was converted while playing the role of Jesus in a sacrilegious play entitled *Christ in a Tuxedo*. He was supposed to read two verses from the Sermon on the Mount, remove his gown, and cry out, "Give me my tuxedo and top hat!" But as he read the words, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" [Matthew 5:3, 4], he began to tremble. Instead of following the script, he kept reading from Matthew chapter five, ignoring the coughs, calls, and foot-stamping of his

> fellow actors. Finally, recalling a verse he had learned in his childhood, he cried, "Lord remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom!" (Luke 23:42). Before the curtain could be lowered, Rostovzev had trusted Jesus Christ as his personal Saviour.[9]

Lesson 2: Sometimes the church will appear to be beaten down, defeated, and nearly destroyed, but God's hand is on His church and it will triumph at last.

3. The family of God: "I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named" (Ephesians 3:14, 15). God's family will not be fractured. It will not be broken apart or be irreparably damaged. God's family—His church—is in His hands, and it will triumph at last.

Here is something to think about. Christ's church is His bride, and if we are His sons and daughters (see 2 Corinthians 6:17, 18), then the church is our mother. I do not want to criticize Jesus' bride under any circumstances, do you? How do you think Jesus would feel if we criticized His bride? Neither do I want anyone to criticize my mother. Did your mother ever make mistakes? Certainly, but she is still your mother. To criticize Christ's church is to criticize Christ's bride. It is to ridicule our spiritual mother.

Enfeebled and defective as it may be, the church of Christ is the object of His supreme regard. It will not disintegrate. It will not fall apart. It will rise to its destiny and ultimately triumph. It will be victorious over all of the powers of hell. It will defeat all of its foes, and the world will be filled with the glory of God. Christ's church will triumph, and the only questions we need

to face are these: Will we triumph with it? Will we allow God's refining hand to hammer and chisel us to prepare us as glorious stones in the temple of truth? Will we use our God-given gifts to build up the body and not tear it down? Will we cherish and love the bride of Christ as Jesus loves her?

Lesson 3: Christ will hold His family in His hand and never let it go. He will take it by the hand and lead it to the kingdom.

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4. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1952), 268.
5. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1911), 593.
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The one thing that held the New Testament church together was the lives transformed by the Holy Spirit. The church had a commitment to Christ and His Word and a desire to share His prophetic, present-truth message with the New Testament world. To the believers, good news was for sharing.

FIVE

Toward Unity in the Body of Christ

The atmosphere in the Battle Creek Tabernacle seemed tense. A significant doctrinal issue, the time for the beginning and ending of the Sabbath, had not yet been fully settled. Joseph Bates, long considered the father of the Sabbath truth, was convinced the Sabbath began and ended at 6:00 P.M. everywhere in the world. James and Ellen White, along with many other Adventists, took this same position. Young John Andrews was not so sure.

When James White asked him to study the subject from the Bible, Andrews wrote a convincing paper arguing that the Sabbath began and ended not at 6:00 P.M. but at sundown. It is interesting that many Adventists who heard Andrews's paper

read that Sabbath morning had begun observing the Sabbath at 6:00 P.M. the evening before, which happened to be an hour *after* sundown. But now, convinced by Andrews's arguments, they concluded their Sabbath at sunset that evening. Ellen White, however, and the old sea captain, Joseph Bates, were not yet convinced. Would God lead them to make a change when Seventh-day Adventists had been keeping the Sabbath from 6:00 P.M. for nearly ten years?

As Arthur White puts it in his biography, *Ellen G. White: The Early Years*, "This was a rather touchy point of division that was bound to widen as time went on."[1] On November 20, 1855, light broke through the darkness. God gave Ellen White a vision of the time to begin the Sabbath and clearly revealed the "even to even" (or sunset-to-sunset) principle. Ellen White's visions confirmed the Bible study of John Andrews.

Early Adventists settled doctrinal and administrative issues like these in three ways:

1. They studied the Word of God.
2. They were guided by the gift of prophecy to confirm the truths they studied in Scripture.
3. They also accepted that in some matters the Bible presented principles and that, guided by these principles, the church had the authority to decide the best course of action to preserve unity and foster mission.

There are times when honest people may see issues differently. They may have different opinions about the same subject. At times our vision is blurred, and we may not see things clearly. This was true both in the New Testament church and in early

Adventism. How do you settle theological difficulties when there are honest differences of opinion on the biblical text and when you do not have a living prophet?

In their study of the operation and administration of the New Testament church, our early Adventist pioneers found biblical principles for resolving challenging situations. In this chapter, we will study some of those principles found in the book of Acts. As we look at this issue, there is one thing we will discover for certain—when an issue was diligently studied, openly discussed, fairly debated, and mutually agreed-on, both the New Testament church and early Adventists accepted the authority of the church to make corporate decisions.

So let's survey the book of Acts and briefly review how the New Testament church dealt with difficult issues—issues that had the potential to disrupt the unity of the church, issues that at times were somewhat thorny. How did the New Testament believers work through these issues, and what principles can we derive from their example for the church today? Did the New Testament church leadership ever make a judgment error, and if they did, what was the outcome of that mistake? We will look at several episodes in the book of Acts and analyze how the New Testament church dealt with potential conflict. We will also look at an incident when New Testament church leadership did not get it right.

The book of Acts is all about God's mission to the world. It describes thirty years of vigorous evangelistic activity. The theme of Acts is summarized in chapter 1, verse 8: "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

Throughout the book of Acts the devil introduced potential

flash points, possible conflicts, to distract from and deter mission. The early believers were able to face these challenges and develop strategies to meet them.

Choosing a new apostle (Acts 1:15–26)

The first possible point of contention arose with the necessity of replacing Judas in the circle of the twelve apostles. The choice of such an important position could easily have brought division among believers. Let's examine their process of making the choice.

First of all, the decision was bathed in earnest prayer. "These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers" (Acts 1:14). Much earnest prayer is essential when facing difficult situations and decisions.

A meeting of the believers was called with Peter leading out (Acts 1:15). One hundred and twenty believers gathered in the upper room to discuss the issue in an atmosphere of involvement, fairness, and openness. There was a sense of participation by everyone. There is also the implication of an organizational structure.

There was an appeal to Scripture (Acts 1:20). Peter established the divine reality that the New Testament church was a prophetic movement based on Scripture, quoting Psalm 41:9 referring to the prophecy of one of Christ's followers betraying Him. All the believers sensed the decision was based on Scripture.

Peter made very clear to the group that the purpose of the decision was to facilitate witness (Acts 1:22) The focus of the New Testament church's decision-making process was: Is this decision faithful to Scripture and will it facilitate mission?

The believers came to a consensus where they could. In this

instance, they came to an agreement on two names—Justus and Matthias (Acts 1:23). It's obvious that some preferred one name and others preferred the other name. Any time there is a choice between two options, someone is likely to be disappointed when their preference is not chosen. But these New Testament believers were committed to doing God's will. Verse 24 reveals the earnest desire of their hearts. They prayed to the Lord, "Show which of these two You have chosen." Only if you are willing to give up the thing you want most in order to follow God's will can you know you are truly being honest when you pray. To ardently defend your position and pray that others will come to your point of view leaves you vulnerable to misunderstanding God's will.

After discussion and prayer, these believers chose a well-accepted process to settle the issue. Casting lots was a common practice and one that Israel had used throughout its history. The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* cites six different instances in the Old Testament when lots were used to make various decisions: (1) choosing goats on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:5–10); (2) allotting land to the tribes (Numbers 26:55; Joshua 18:10); (3) settling cases when there was uncertainty (Joshua 7:14, 18); (4) choosing forces for battle (Judges 20:8–10); (5) appointing the high priest (1 Samuel 10:19, 21); and (6) allotting cities to the priests (1 Chronicles 6:54–65).[2] In biblical times casting lots was an acceptable method of decision making. Obviously, that is not God's plan for today. We could surmise that the results from casting lots in ancient times were accepted by a majority consensus similar to voting in our day.

The New Testament believers were linked in indissoluble union to Christ and trusted Him and one another enough to accept the outcome of the decision-making process. Once

the decision was made and the outcome determined, the text simply says, "And he [Matthias] was numbered with the eleven apostles" (Acts 1:26). The key point here is that once they had prayed, studied the Word, sought God's guidance, discussed the issue, and made a decision, the New Testament church accepted God's will and moved on with their mission. They trusted the decision they had collectively made and covenanted together to passionately pursue the church's mission. Each individual believer submitted his or her personal view to the decision made under God's guidance.

When there is an erosion of trust, conflict festers. When there is an unwillingness to submit personal judgment to the prayerful, thoughtful, representative decisions of the corporate body, dissension and division flourish.

In Acts 1, we see the church's organizational structure in its infancy. The New Testament church was designed for mission. The disciples were consumed with preaching a crucified, risen, and returning Savior. The story of the book of Acts is the story of a body of believers totally committed to Christ and His message, sharing His love and truth everywhere.

Choosing deacons (Acts 6:1–7)

When the Holy Spirit was poured out, three thousand were baptized in response to Peter's sermon (see Acts 2:41). As the church's mission continued to march forward, the inspired account records, "Many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand" (Acts 4:4). If one includes women and children, the number of believers would likely be 15,000–20,000. The New Testament church grew rapidly. The Bible says of the believers that "daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease preaching

and teaching Jesus" (Acts 5:42). Thousands were coming to Jesus. God's mission was priority. Winning the lost to Christ was the disciple's passion. The devil knew that and introduced conflict.

Acts chapter 6 records a conflict that arose in the church over food distribution to widows in the church. The perception was that widows of Greek descent were being neglected in favor of the Jewish widows. The disciples discussed the problem with the larger body. Ellen White shares this divine insight on Satan's intent in introducing this conflict: "The hearts of those who had been converted under the labors of the apostles, were softened and united by Christian love. Despite former prejudices, all were in harmony with one another. Satan knew that so long as this union continued to exist, he would be powerless to check the progress of gospel truth; and he sought to take advantage of former habits of thought, in the hope that thereby he might be able to introduce into the church elements of disunion."[3]

The disciples knew that as long as this problem festered like a cancer, the mission of the church would be impeded, and this would serve Satan's purpose. They proposed to select men of good reputation who were honest, deeply spiritual, and full of wisdom to deal with the problem so that the apostles could continue focusing on prayer and the ministry of the Word (see Acts 6:4) The seven who were chosen were a representative group, well respected and perceived as being godly and fair. Notice something specific: each of the names in the following list of the deacons selected is a *Greek* name—Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas. These were men who would be well respected by the community of Greek Christians who had felt slighted. Once the solution was proposed, the disciples prayed, laid hands on these first deacons, and ordained

them for a specific task. Then, once the issue was dealt with, the disciples moved on to mission.

The devil's goal was to disrupt mission. But once again the believers accepted the decision of the body and were willing to surrender their personal desires in order to focus on mission. Ellen White ties the decision of Acts 6 with the decision of the Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts 15:

> The order that was maintained in the early Christian church made it possible for them to move forward solidly as a well-disciplined army clad with the armor of God. The companies of believers, though scattered over a large territory, were all members of one body; all moved in concert and in harmony with one another. When dissension arose in a local church, as later it did arise in Antioch and elsewhere, and the believers were unable to come to an agreement among themselves, such matters were not permitted to create a division in the church, but were referred to a general council of the entire body of believers, made up of appointed delegates from the various local churches, with the apostles and elders in positions of leading responsibility. Thus the efforts of Satan to attack the church in isolated places were met by concerted action on the part of all, and the plans of the enemy to disrupt and destroy were thwarted.[4]

Answering the question of circumcision (Acts 15:1–29)

A major problem surfaced at the church at Antioch. Certain Jewish leaders were teaching that circumcision was necessary for salvation (Acts 15:1). But before we judge these leaders too harshly,

let's try to understand why they thought the way they did.

Circumcision was a sign of God's covenant with Israel. God had commanded Abraham, "This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised" (Genesis 17:10). Verse 13 refers to this as an "everlasting covenant." So this issue was an extremely serious one for the early church. These Jewish leaders saw accepting Gentiles as part of the faith community without circumcision as a violation of the everlasting covenant God gave to Abraham. This issue had the potential to divide the growing New Testament church.

After Paul and Barnabas had a considerable discussion with these Jewish leaders at Antioch and were involved in what the Bible calls "no small dissension and dispute" (Acts 15:2), the local church there decided to send them to Jerusalem to receive direction from the larger church body. This implies at least two things: (1) trust that the decision made by representative leaders at Jerusalem would be best for the church and (2) a willingness to submit to that decision. Ellen White describes the situation this way: "Finally, the members of the church, fearing that a division among them would be the outcome of continued discussion, decided to send Paul and Barnabas, with some responsible men from the church, to Jerusalem to lay the matter before the apostles and elders. There they were to meet delegates from the different churches and those who had come to Jerusalem to attend the approaching festivals. Meanwhile all controversy was to cease until a final decision should be given in general council. This decision was then to be universally accepted by the different churches throughout the country."[5]

During this council at Jerusalem there were three main speakers—Peter, Paul, and James. Each of these apostles reasoned

from a slightly different perspective. Peter reflected on his experience with Cornelius and the fact that the Holy Spirit was poured out on Cornelius and his household in a similar way to what happened at Pentecost. In essence, Peter declared that God had given him a divine revelation to witness to Cornelius and that he had personally experienced what God did at that time.

The apostle Paul built on Peter's story. He related the miracles he had seen taking place among the Gentiles and their miraculous conversion. "How can we deny what God is doing among the Gentiles," he argued, "since we see such an abundant manifestation of the Holy Spirit?"

James quoted an Old Testament prophecy (Amos 9:11, 12) and reasoned that the Old Testament prophecies themselves predicted a moving of the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles.

After a great deal of discussion, the Jerusalem Council voted a resolution. Gentile converts, it agreed, did not need to be circumcised, but they did need to do three things: (1) abstain from things polluted by idols; (2) refrain from sexual immorality; and (3) refrain from eating things strangled and abstain from blood (Acts 15:19, 20).

There are three principles to take note of here:

1. Although the Gentiles were not required to be circumcised, they were required to make some dramatic changes in their lives. Both groups—Jews and Gentiles—were asked to do something that required a change and that would make them feel somewhat uncomfortable.
2. Both groups had to submit to the decisions of the Jerusalem Council, which they did not find easy to accept.

3. Although Jews and Gentiles would not follow exactly the same practices, there was a recognition of, and respect for, differences—and this did not disrupt the unity of the church.

The New Testament church recognized that unity did not necessarily mean uniformity in practice. But they were absolutely united on the fundamentals of faith. They were committed to the same Jesus, shared the same basic beliefs, proclaimed the same prophetic message, and were passionate about the same mission. They were willing to accept the decision of the Jerusalem Council rather than follow their own individual opinions and thus fragment the church.

This decision of the Jerusalem Council was clearly communicated to all believers. It was detailed in a letter and sent with Paul and Barnabas, along with other representative leaders, to explain the decision to the Antioch church and other churches in the region. The church did not fragment, because the Holy Spirit led believers to accept the decision of the Jerusalem Council and because, guided by the Holy Spirit, the church leadership made a decision that was both faithful to Scripture and fostered mission.

There are times when the Holy Spirit beckons us to change cherished positions for the sake of the unity of the church. Ellen White's counsel is instructive:

> When, in a General Conference, the judgment of the brethren assembled from all parts of the field is exercised, private independence and private judgment must not be stubbornly maintained, but surrendered. Never should a laborer regard as a virtue the persistent

> maintenance of his position of independence, contrary to the decision of the general body. . . .
>
> God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have authority.[6]

The New Testament pattern for unity and resolving major differences is clear. As challenges arose, the New Testament church prayed earnestly, sought scriptural answers, discussed the issues together, considered what was best for the mission of the church, and together made a decision on the issue. The believers loved one another and the church enough to surrender their personal opinions for the sake of unity and mission.

This leads us to a significant question: How does one blend individual convictions with the decisions of the larger body of Christ when those decisions run counter to one's convictions?

Keep in mind there is a difference between the decisions that relate to the practices of the corporate church and those individual convictions that relate to our personal salvation and lifestyle. We should never surrender our personal convictions of salvation, morality, or lifestyle. When the Holy Spirit convicts us of something that relates to us personally, our responsibility is directly to God in that matter. But when the issue is one for the corporate church to decide, that is a different matter. If every individual followed his or her own independent judgment in church matters rather than the collective decision of the church body, it would obviously result in organizational chaos.

In the book of Acts, there are five essentials that held the early church together: (1) their total commitment to Christ; (2) their dependence on the continual guidance of the Holy Spirit; (3) their faithful obedience to the Word of God; (4) their passionate

proclamation of a prophetic message; and (5) their recognition of the authority of church organization.

There is still a pertinent question to be raised: Is it possible for an individual leader or group of leaders to make a mistake in judgment? And if so, how should a committed Christian relate to it?

It is fascinating to note that after the Jerusalem Council, Peter compromised his integrity by refusing to eat with the Gentiles when Jews were present. He openly went against the spirit and sentiment of the voted action of the corporate body of believers. He followed his own inclinations rather than the mutually agreed-on actions of the church at large. Paul knew that he could not let this go undisputed or it would seriously affect church unity. Consequently, he challenged Peter regarding his actions. To his credit, Peter sensed his mistake, repented, and changed his course of action. Leaders have the responsibility to hold one another accountable to live in harmony with the prayerful, careful, mutually agreed-on actions of the corporate church.

Attempting to appease some radically conservative Jews (Acts 21:17–25)

What if the corporate church gets it wrong? What if the committee's vote is contrary to the will of God? What if the counsel of the brethren is not in harmony with the mind of God?

Picture this scene. The elders at Jerusalem encourage Paul to take four Jews into the temple at Jerusalem to complete a vow and pay for the charges of the vow. Doing so would include having his head shaved by a Levite barber and paying for a series of sacrifices, including those of a lamb, a ewe, a ram, and a basket of unleavened bread, among other things. In an attempt

to appease some of the more radically conservative Jews, the elders at Jerusalem urged Paul to enter the temple with these four Jewish men who were in the last week of completing a Nazarite vow. And in an attempt to please the Jerusalem elders and the Jews, Paul consented. Ellen White is clear that this was a mistake when she writes, "The Spirit of God did not prompt this instruction; it was the fruit of cowardice."[7] As a result of following the counsel of the apostles, Paul was condemned by the Jewish elders and cast into prison. It appeared that his ministry was finished. After two days in prison, our Lord Himself appeared to Paul with these reassuring words, "Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome" (Acts 23:11).

Our Lord's plan for Paul would be fulfilled. No person on earth, nor all the evil forces in this world, could stop God's plan for His disciple. Paul had this inner sense, this overwhelming conviction, that God was in ultimate control and would overrule even the mistakes of the "brethren" to accomplish His ultimate purpose.

There are times when we face challenging situations, when things do not go as we wish. We have certain convictions, but a committee seems to vote the opposite of those convictions. It is difficult to understand at such moments. I'm sure that there were times when Ellen White felt that way. Here is a remarkable statement that keeps us anchored in challenging times: "Our heavenly Father has a thousand ways to provide for us of which we know nothing. Those who accept the one principle of making the service of God supreme, will find perplexities vanish and a plain path before their feet."[8]

If God wanted Paul to share the gospel in Rome, He was fully capable of getting him there in spite of the mistakes or poor

judgment of others. And along the way the apostle powerfully witnessed to Felix, Festus, Agrippa, and others. In Rome, Paul's overwhelming passion was to share the Christ who had changed his life. He knew God had sent him, and nothing—absolutely nothing—could change that divine reality. Paul was focused on the task, consumed with the mission, caught up with the vision of proclaiming Christ to a lost world.

Writing from Rome to the Philippian Christians, Paul made this amazing statement: "All the saints greet you, but especially those who are of Caesar's household" (Philippians 4:22).

The gospel was so powerful, Paul's witness so effective, God's plan so complete, that there were converts even in Caesar's very household. More than anything else, the one thing that held the New Testament church together was the lives transformed by the Holy Spirit. The church had a commitment to Christ and His Word and a desire to share His prophetic, present-truth message with the New Testament world. To the believers, good news was for sharing. Christ was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies regarding the Messiah. He was born of a virgin, lived the righteous life they should have lived, died the death they should have died, rose from the dead, and appeared in heaven's sanctuary on their behalf. Christ was alive, and He was coming again. His offer of eternal life was real, and they must share it.

This was their desire, their passion, and their overwhelming conviction. Filled with the Holy Spirit, young and old, slave and free, men and women proclaimed the message of their crucified, resurrected, interceding, and returning Lord. Paul shared it in Rome. Peter shared it in Jerusalem. Mary shared it after the Resurrection. Timothy shared it in Ephesus. Priscilla and Aquila shared it in Corinth. Onesimus, the runaway slave, shared it in

Colossae. Lydia shared it in Thyatira. Barnabas shared it in Cyprus. Phoebe shared it in Cenchrea. Thomas shared it in India. John shared it, exiled and alone, on an isle called Patmos.

Like the New Testament church, God's church today faces difficult decisions. Whatever decision is ultimately made on any issue the church is facing, here is my prayer: that nothing but God's unifying and prophetic mission will be the central focus of our lives; that the Holy Spirit will fall in latter-rain power on this church; that, like the early church, we will see a mighty mission movement affecting the world with the gospel; and that we will be known, as were the early disciples, as those "who have turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). I pray that the words of Matthew 24:14 will be fulfilled in this generation, that the gospel of the kingdom will be preached to all the world in this generation and then the end will come. I pray that we will see the fulfillment of Revelation 14:6, which proclaims, "Then I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth—to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people."

This is our calling. This is our destiny. This is the purpose of our existence. And we cannot and will not fail Him now. By His grace, through His power, in His strength, filled with His Spirit, the task will be accomplished, the work of God on earth will be finished, and we will go home.

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1. Arthur White, *Ellen White: The Early Years* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald®, 1985), 323.

2. Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, s.v. "26. Gave forth their lots" (Washington, DC: Review and Herald®, 1957), 6:131.

3. Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1911), 87.

4. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 95.
5. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 190.
6. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1948), 9:260.
7. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 404.
8. Ellen G. White, *The Faith I Live By* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald®, 1958), 64.

The earth will be filled with
the glory of God when
we are so completely
overwhelmed by His grace
that our characters are
changed by redeeming love.

SIX

When the Earth Is Filled With the Glory of God

During World War I, Germany utilized submarines against the United Kingdom. On Friday, May 7, 1915, a German submarine, *U-20,* torpedoed the RMS *Lusitania,* which sunk in a mere eighteen minutes. This attack on a civilian vessel killed 1,198 and left 761 survivors; and consequently, nations who had to this point remained neutral now recognized the German threat. The sinking of the *Lusitania* became one of the major reasons why the United States of America joined the fight.[1]

There is a story attached to this disaster that has relevance to Bible-believing Christians, and especially Seventh-day Adventists living in the last days of human history. Lord Joseph

Duveen was the American head of a prestigious art firm in the United States.

> [In 1915, he planned] to send one of his experts to England to examine some ancient pottery. He booked [his employee] passage on the *Lusitania*. [Prior to the ocean liner's sailing,] the German Embassy issued a warning that the liner might be torpedoed. Duveen wanted to call off the trip. "I can't take the risk of your being killed," he said to his young expert.
>
> "Don't worry," the man replied, "I'm a strong swimmer, and when I read what was happening in the Atlantic, I began hardening myself by spending time every day in a tub of ice water. At first I could stand it for only a few minutes, but this morning I stayed in that tub nearly two hours."
>
> Naturally, Duveen laughed. It sounded preposterous. But this expert sailed; the *Lusitania* was torpedoed. The young man was rescued after nearly five hours in the chilly ocean, still in excellent condition.[2]

This young man prepared himself in advance for tough times—just as we are told to be prepared for the difficult times that will precede our Lord's return. In His sermon on end-time events, recorded in Matthew 24, Jesus gives us three admonitions about preparing for that great day. First, He states, "Take heed that no one deceives you" (verse 4). In other words, "Be on guard." In verse 42, He adds, "Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming." In other words, "Stay alert to the signs that are taking place all around you." And third, our Lord declares in verse 44, "Therefore, you also be

ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." It would be more accurate to translate this final admonition as, "Be in a state of readiness." Jesus does not say, "Get ready." He says, "Be ready."

Ellen White comments,

> Transgression has almost reached its limit. Confusion fills the world, and a great terror is soon to come upon human beings. The end is very near. God's people should be preparing for what is to break upon the world as an overwhelming surprise.[3]

The apostle Paul adds,

> But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober (1 Thessalonians 5:4–6).

Bible-believing Christians, and Seventh-day Adventists in particular, have divine insight into what is coming on this world. The prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, combined with the modern gift of prophecy, give us inside information. They reveal the amazing events that will soon occur. Revelation 18 focuses on the major events leading up to the climax of human history, describing what is coming in rather specific details: "After these things I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was illuminated with his glory" (verse 1).

This angel comes down from the glorious presence of God in the throne room of the sanctuary, commissioned to proclaim God's last message of mercy and to warn the inhabitants of the earth of what is coming to the world.

The text says that the angel comes with "great authority." The Greek word here translated "authority" is *exousia*. Jesus used this same word when He sent out His disciples (see Matthew 10:1). He gave His disciples authority over the principalities and powers of hell—He sent them out with the divine power to be victorious in the battle between good and evil. Near the end of His earthly ministry, He told them, "All authority [*exousia*] has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations" (Matthew 28:18, 19).

Filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, the New Testament church went forth with the authority of the living Christ to illuminate the earth with God's glory. In a few short years, the disciples proclaimed the gospel in all the then-known world (see Colossians 1:23). At the end time, the Holy Spirit will be poured out in unprecedented power, and the gospel will rapidly be spread to the ends of the earth. Thousands will be converted in a day, and God's grace and truth will affect the entire planet.

If this is true—and it is—would it not be wise for us to open our hearts to receive this mighty outpouring of the Spirit to finish the work of God on the earth?

Would it not be wise to ask Jesus to take out of our lives anything that would hinder the Spirit's work?

Would it not be wise to seek God for the heart cleansing necessary to receive the latter rain of the Spirit in all of His fullness?

Throughout Revelation there are three words that are often linked together—*glory*, *honor*, and *power*. "You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory, honor and power" (Revelation 4:11; 5:12;

19:1; 21:26). The great controversy between good and evil in the universe is about God's honor, His reputation. The rebel angel has declared that God is unjust, that He demands worship but gives little in return. The evil one declares that God's law is arbitrary and that it restricts our freedom and limits our joy.

Jesus' life, death, and resurrection exploded that myth. The One who created us plunged into this snake pit of a world to redeem us. On the cross, He answered Satan's charges and demonstrated that God is both loving and just.

Charmed by His love and concerned about His honor, His end-time people reveal His glory—His loving, self-sacrificing character—to a self-centered, godless world, and the earth is illuminated by the character of God. Remember when Moses asked God to show him His glory? God answered, "I will make all My goodness pass before you" (Exodus 33:19). God's goodness is His character.

The earth will be filled with the glory of God when we are so completely overwhelmed by His grace that our characters are changed by redeeming love. As the apostle John declared, "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God. . . . Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:1, 2).

Revealing His love in our personal lives reveals His glory, His character, to the world. Ellen White puts it this way: "The message of Christ's righteousness is to sound from one end of the world to the other. This is the glory of God which closes the work of the third angel."[4]

Babylon and all false religions speak of the glory of man. Genuine Christianity speaks of the glory of Christ.

Babylon and all false religions speak of *human* reputation, *human* honor. Genuine Christianity speaks of *Christ's* reputation and *Christ's* honor.

Babylon and all false religions speak of human works, what *I* have done. Genuine Christianity speaks of what *Christ* has done.

Babylon and all false religions speak of what *I* am doing for Christ. Genuine Christianity speaks of what *Christ* has done for me.

Babylon and all false religions are based on a distortion of biblical truth, founded in human opinion. Genuine Christianity is based on the truth as it is in Jesus, anchored in God's Word.

It is this gratitude for all that Christ has done for us that motivates our behavior and leads us to commit our lives entirely to Him.

There is a wonderful story that illustrates this point marvelously.

> Nicholas II was one of the most beneficent Tsars of Russia, "the father of the people." On one occasion he was acting orderly officer to troops stationed in a lonely Cossack fortress. . . .
>
> It was a cold, blustering night, and the wind howled mournfully round the tower and rattled the windows of an office in which a young man sat. Count Ivanovitch gazed with dull eyes at the fire; there was nothing he could do—he was smashed.
>
> Ivan was the darling of society, both in Moscow and St. Petersburg; brave, dashing, handsome, he was everybody's favorite. His father had held high military rank and served the Tsar faithfully until his death.

Now exposure and disgrace loomed before Ivan.

For months he had been living far beyond his means, and he was head over ears in debt. Then, poor foolish boy, he made what was bad so much worse, for he began to help himself from the regimental funds. He was always going to pay it back, but somehow he never did. It would be quite impossible now; his debts rose like a mountain before him. Tomorrow the military auditors were coming to the fortress to check up the accounts.

The table behind him was all spread over with open account books and ledgers; he had been going through them again and again till his head ached. He would be court-martialed and dismissed [from] the Service—perhaps imprisoned. Yes, his career was finished.

Gazing moodily into the fire, the wretched boy cried out, "That is only way out." He got up and found his pistol and was bringing it back to the fire when the open ledgers and books on the table seemed to draw him. He sat down, went over them again and again[, and]then made some rough calculations on a sheet of paper; it was no good, so pistol in hand, he went back to his seat by the fire.

There was no hurry; he had about five or six hours left. He stared into the fire and thought he saw in the burnt-out coals a picture of his wasted life. [Gazing into the flames, exhausted, discouraged, he dozed off into a deep sleep still clutching his pistol in hand.]

At midnight the orderly officer arrived at the fortress and went on his rounds. Coming along the corridor

he was surprised to see a light under the door of the office at that hour. He opened it softly and looked in. A litter of books and ledgers, open on the table, and his friend, Count Ivanovitch, asleep in a chair with a pistol in his hand—that was what he saw.

Amazed, he went nearer to examine the books, and on the table he found a sheet of paper inscribed, "What I owe;" a long, long list of figures followed and at the end a boyish scrawl: "So great a debt! Who can pay it?"

The orderly officer looked more closely at the sleeper and marked the misery and despair on his face, then he took up a pen, added a few words at the bottom of the page, quietly removed the pistol and went away. As dawn broke Count Ivanovitch awoke. . . . The day had dawned which was to bring the dreaded scrutiny. There was just one way out, but where was the pistol? He got up to search for it, then he went over to the table. It was not there; but he saw something at which he stared incredulously. It was just a sheet of paper covered with a long list of debts in his own writing, but something had been added since he had fell asleep. Under his despairing question, "Who can pay so great a debt?" was now written: "I will, Nicholas, Tsar."

Strange things happened at the fortress that day; dispatch riders and couriers came and went. Headquarters postponed the military audit for three months, and Count Ivanovitch was recalled to the capital for a period of duty at the Palace. He never forgot his interview with the Tsar, for it was the turning

> point to a life that henceforth became straight-forward, honorable, and prosperous.[5]

You and I owe a debt that is far beyond our ability to pay. Our indebtedness is so great that it is like a mountain poised to crush us. The law demands absolute, perfect righteousness. Nothing else will do. But praise God, Jesus was absolutely, perfectly righteous! And He offers to cover us with that life of perfect righteousness. As the old hymn says,

> O, to grace how great a debtor
> Daily I'm constrained to be;
> Let that grace now like a fetter
> Bind my wandering heart to Thee.[6]

The message that the three angels of Revelation 14 proclaim to a world engulfed in spiritual darkness is, "Fear God and give glory to Him" (Revelation 14:7). Give glory to Him, because there is no glory in our works, no glory in our righteousness, no glory in our goodness.

Ellen White states plainly, "What is justification by faith? It is the work of God in laying the glory of man in the dust, and doing for man that which it is not in his power to do for himself."[7]

This is the opposite of the false teachings of Babylon, which are centered on human works and teachings. That is why the second angel cries "mightily with a loud voice, saying, 'Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and has become a dwelling place of demons . . . for all the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the

earth have become rich through the abundance of her luxury' " (Revelation 18:2, 3).

Demonic forces control spiritual Babylon. All nations have drunk the wine of her fornication. Wine represents false doctrine. Those who drink the wine of Babylon become confused in their thinking and mistake error for truth and conclude that truth is error.

Fornication is an illicit union. Notice carefully who unites in this end-time confederacy—Babylon and the kings of the earth.

The origin of Babylon is the tower of Babel, so let's look at Genesis 11 to gain some amazing insights about the symbolism of Babylon. "And they [the people of the earth] said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves' " (Genesis 11:4).

The emphasis on the pronoun *ourselves* suggests their insistence that they are independent from God. The builders of Babel intended to create a secular civilization separate from God.

The Hebrew word for "tower" is *migdal.* It is related to the word *gadal,* which means "great." It implies the idea of ambition and glory. The purpose of the builders is obviously a spiritual ambition to replace God. They push themselves upward, because they refuse to believe in the God who comes down.

This very word, *gadal,* which is associated with the tower of Babel and spiritual Babylon, is also used to describe the little-horn power of Daniel 7. Like the builders at Babel, the little horn also attempts to exalt itself to the heavens, placing its authority above the authority of God, casting down God's truth and changing His law.

Babylon unites with the "kings of the earth" and "the merchants of the earth." Revelation 18 pictures a union of apostate false religions, political powers, and financial or economic

powers. This threefold union combines in a confederacy of evil to eventually persecute the people of God.

Revelation 18 is God's final appeal to all humanity. "And I heard another voice from heaven saying, 'Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues' " (verse 4).

Where are most of God's people today? In Babylon. And what is God's final call? "Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins." What is sin? It is the transgression of God's law (see 1 John 3:4). God is calling His people to come out of every lawbreaking church. Why is God making this final call now? Revelation 18:5 tells us, "For her sins have reached to heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities."

There comes a point when God says, "Enough." In the days of Noah, God said, "Enough." In the days of Sodom and Gomorrah, God said, "Enough." In the days of Babylon, God said, "Enough." In the last days of earth's history, God will say, "Enough." The prophet of God puts it this way: "With unerring accuracy the Infinite One still keeps an account with all nations. While His mercy is tendered with calls to repentance, this account will remain open; but when the figures reach a certain amount which God has fixed, the ministry of His wrath commences. The account is closed. Divine patience ceases. There is no more pleading of mercy in their behalf."[8]

Where are we in the stream of time? Where are we in the panorama of last-day events? Where are we in the march of history?

We are poised on the verge of a religious, political, and economic union. The accumulated figures of sin are rapidly reaching their limit in God's record book.

God is preparing a people to proclaim the marvels of His grace, the greatness of His love, the goodness of His character,

the righteousness of His law, and the beauty of His truth. Bathed in His righteousness, they are justified by His grace and sanctified through His power. They love His truth, live His truth, and proclaim His truth.

They count all things but loss for Christ. He is their all in all. They care not for earthly fame or human accolades. Position, prestige, and earthly praise mean little to them. With the apostle Paul they say, "For to me, to live is Christ" (Philippians 1:21). Empowered by His Spirit, they proclaim His love and share His grace. The earth is lightened with the glory—the character—of God. The Holy Spirit is poured out in latter-rain power. Hearts are touched. Lives are changed. The world is reached, and Jesus comes again.

---

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Genuine Christianity
is focused on others.
The essence of true
faith is an authentic
relationship with God
that leads to
self-sacrificial service.

SEVEN

Genuine Fakes Won't Do

We had just walked out of the famed archeological sites of Ephesus and its authentic ancient ruins. Thoughts of the Celsus Library, Hadrian's Odeon, and the magnificence of the fifteen-thousand-seat theater were swirling in my head. As I slowly made my way through an array of booths with Turkish merchants hawking their wares and selling everything from bottled water to camel rides, one sign caught my attention. I stood silently for a few moments, gazing at the sign to be sure I was reading it correctly. Its bold letters screamed at me until I started laughing. The sign that so vividly caught my eye read, "Genuine Fake Watches for Sale." I wondered what a "genuine fake watch" was. Then I thought, *If I buy a fake watch, I certainly want it to*

be a genuine fake. I don't want a fake, fake watch.

I am now the proud owner of a genuine fake Rolex watch. My friend who collects watches tells me you cannot tell the difference between my genuine fake Rolex Oyster Perpetual watch and his original. In fact, when we put them side by side, he had a difficult time telling which one was the fake and which one was the original. Oh, yes, there is one difference. The retail price for his genuine Rolex was $8,446 and the price for my genuine fake was around $100. I have thought of that sign and my watch a great deal. Could you imagine a sign over a church building that said, "Genuine Fake Christians Worship Here"? "Genuine fake Christians" look like the real thing, but something is tragically missing.

One thing is for certain—genuine fake Christians will not make an impact on the world for Christ. Difference makers in this world are those who have an authentic, genuine, heartfelt, life-changing experience with Christ. They are committed to living His life of sacrificial service and unselfish love. People all around us long for those who are authentic, not for those who are fake. They long for those who are real and genuine, not those who are artificial and make-believe. International surveys indicate that around the world trust levels in governmental, educational, medical, and economic institutions are dropping. Even the Christian church, with its sexual and financial scandals, is losing the trust of many people. People are longing for something or someone who is authentic and trustworthy.

A longing for trust

As the world's business elite gathered in the Swiss resort of Davos, the public relations firm Edelman found that the general level of trust in institutions among college-educated people

around the globe was eroding in the markets it surveyed. The *Harvard Business Review* published an article titled "The Authenticity Paradox." In 2013, only 18 percent of the people surveyed reported that they trusted leaders in business, and fewer than half trusted businesses to act with integrity.[1]

If there were ever a time that the world was looking for a revelation of authentic Christianity, it is today. And if there were ever a place where the world should expect to find such a revelation, it is in the lives of the people who are followers of Christ. What is authentic Christianity? What would it look like lived out in the life of a Christian in the twenty-first century? What is the essence of the real thing?

Authentic Christianity

There is a story in Matthew 20 that reveals the heart of what Christianity really is. It powerfully describes the essence of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem for the final time. He has unsuccessfully tried to explain to His disciples that He soon will be rejected, tried, falsely accused, and crucified, but for some reason their presuppositions about the Messiah have kept them from understanding the nature of His mission. They filtered what Jesus said through mistaken ideas of earthly greatness that were swirling around in their heads. Ideas of prominence in a new kingdom and worldly greatness were the basis for the request made by the mother of James and John. She said to Jesus, "Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom" (Matthew 20:21).

Salome, the mother of James and John, was likely the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus. James and John, along with Peter, were part of Christ's inner circle. They were some of His closest

companions. And had not Jesus Himself said only a short time earlier, "Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matthew 19:28)?

Wasn't it logical for James and John to think that Jesus was going to Jerusalem to set up His eternal kingdom? And if the disciples were to reign with Him, wouldn't James and John naturally think no one had a better claim to be near Him on His throne than they did? They were His relatives—likely cousins. They had been nearest to Him throughout His ministry. They were His confidants, His closest followers. They believed they deserved these positions of honor and privilege.

The other disciples were obviously distressed over this attempt by James and John to elbow their way into first place in the kingdom. Jesus' response is timeless. It speaks to the heart of authentic Christianity. Calling the disciples to Himself, Jesus said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve" (Matthew 20:25–28).

Grasping or giving?

The principle of this world is grasping. The principle of Christ's kingdom is giving. The principle of this world is self-promotion. The principle of Christ's kingdom is self-sacrifice. The principle of this world is a focus on self. The principle of Christ's kingdom is a focus on others. Jesus knew what was going on in the

disciples' minds, and He spoke to the very heart of the authentic Christian life.

Out in the world, Jesus said, it is quite true that the great man is the one who controls others, the one who is master, the one at whose command others must leap. In the Roman world, domination was the law of the day. The Roman governor with his powerful army, the Eastern potentate with his slaves, the wealthy merchant with his servants, and the landowner with his estates were considered the great men of the ancient world. The world counts these earthly rulers great, but in Christ's assessment, service alone is the badge of greatness. Greatness does not consist of commanding others to do things for us. It consists of our doing things for others. This is the Christian revolution. Here is the complete reversal of the world's standards. Here is a new set of values.

Ellen White makes this observation:

> In the kingdoms of the world, position meant self-aggrandizement. The people were supposed to exist for the benefit of the ruling classes. Influence, wealth, education, were so many means of gaining control of the masses for the use of the leaders. The higher classes were to think, decide, enjoy, and rule; the lower were to obey and serve. Religion, like all things else, was a matter of authority. The people were expected to believe and practice as their superiors directed. The right of man as man, to think and act for himself, was wholly unrecognized.
>
> Christ was establishing a kingdom on different principles. He called men, not to authority, but to service, the strong to bear the infirmities of the weak.

> Power, position, talent, education, placed their possessor under the greater obligation to serve his fellows.[2]

The story of Kagawa

Toyohiko Kagawa, a Japanese Christian, was an amazing example of one who committed his life to service. When Kagawa became a Christian, he prayed, "Oh, God make me like Christ!" Reading the Gospels, he was impressed that to follow Jesus meant to follow Him in the footsteps of service. He decided to enter the slums of Tokyo and minister to the poor and the outcasts. He lived in a six-foot-by-six-foot hut in a Tokyo slum. On his first night a poor, homeless man with a contagious itch asked to share his bed. This was a real test of faith, but Kagawa agreed. He welcomed his bedfellow and shared his small hut with this homeless man. The next day he gave his shirt to another homeless man. Finally, he had given away his trousers and stood in the rain in a ragged old kimono—preaching that God is love. He often fell in the street, exhausted from his incessant labor for the poor and his hours of street preaching.

At first, Tokyo's slum dwellers laughed at Kagawa, but soon they came to deeply respect him. The rough men of the slums often carried him back to his little hut and gently laid the exhausted preacher on his bed. His life of service backed up his words about a God of love. Kagawa once wrote, "God dwells among the lowliest of men. He sits on the dust heap among the prison convicts. He stands with the juvenile delinquents. He is there with the beggars. He is among the sick. He stands with the unemployed. Therefore, let him who would meet God visit the prison cell before going to the temple. Before he goes to church let him visit the hospital. Before he reads the Bible let him help the beggar."[3]

The world may evaluate greatness by wealth, education, position, social status, personal achievements, or popularity. But God's standard of greatness is far different. God evaluates greatness based on unselfish service to others.

On one occasion, Kagawa was invited to address the seminarians at Princeton University. About halfway through his speech, one student turned to another sitting beside him and said cynically, "He is not saying much, is he?"

A lady sitting in the row in front of them, knowing the suffering of this great man of faith and his life of self-sacrificial service, turned and simply said, "When you are hanging on a cross because of love, you do not have to say much."[4]

Genuine Christianity is focused on others. The essence of true faith is an authentic relationship with God that leads to self-sacrificial service. Describing the selfless love of Christ, the apostle Paul wrote, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:5–8).

Christ was in the very form of God, eternally equal with the Father and worshiped by myriads of angels. He is the all-powerful Creator, but He made Himself of "no reputation." The Greek words Paul used here are better translated as "He emptied Himself." Jesus gave up His privileges and prerogatives as God's equal to enter this violent world as a humble, obedient servant and die the most ignominious of deaths on the cross to reveal the Father's love and redeem humanity. In His life and death, Jesus demonstrated true Christianity. He was establishing His

church on the principle of self-sacrificing love. It was to be a light in the darkness of this world. Christ's church calls us to service, not self-centeredness. It invites us to a life of ministry to others, not mastery over others.

An illustration of sacrificial service

During the days of the oppressive Communist regime in the Soviet Union, Mrs. Olga Galon was a secret typist, carefully typing Bible lessons, books, and Christian literature. As she grew older, her vision faded. Her hands trembled, but she continued typing. She had listened to the muffled *tick, tick, tick* of that old typewriter for more than twenty years. At first, she typed those precious book manuscripts sitting in dim light under a table covered with quilts to deaden the sound of the typewriter keys. When that became too dangerous, her husband padded the closet with blankets and quilting material, and she spent up to twelve hours a day in the semi-darkness alone—typing. Illegally typing Christian book manuscripts was a crime punishable with imprisonment in the former Soviet Union. She typed with one finger on one hand, not because she her typing skills were poor but because she had to hit the keys hard enough for the print to be readable on all twelve carbon copies!

Eventually, after typing two thousand copies of *The Desire of Ages*, Sabbath School lessons, and countless other books for twenty years, Mrs. Galon became blind and could type no more. Why did she do all this? Why did Mrs. Galon spend twenty years of her life typing Adventist book manuscripts? There is only one reason. She knew that the life and witness of the church depended on it. She was following in the footsteps of her Master. She was committed to living an authentic Christian life of service.

She knew that the spiritual life of our members depended on their reading Adventist books. She also knew that Christ-centered, truth-filled literature is a powerful witnessing tool. She was willing to make any sacrifice to place our books in the hands of members to read themselves and share with others.

For this godly ambassador for Christ, duty was a delight and sacrifice a pleasure. Her witness and ministry brought light into this darkened world. In Revelation 18:1, our Lord tells us of a time when the earth will be illuminated by the glory of God. God's glory is His character. The Old Testament declares, "The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea" (Habakkuk 2:14).

God's people will triumph at last. His plans for this earth will be accomplished. His church will be victorious over the powers of hell. His church will not disappear into insignificance. It will not flicker like a candle in the wind and go out in darkness. Like the rising of the sun, God's truth will dispel the darkness. Jesus, who is the Light of the world, will shine more brightly through His people as the crisis comes to a climax at the close of this planet's history. Ellen White states it this way: "The church is the repository of the riches of the grace of Christ; and through the church will eventually be made manifest, even to the 'principalities and powers in heavenly places,' the final and full display of the love of God."[5]

You and I are on the winning side. No matter how challenging the days ahead, no matter how dark the future, no matter what difficulties the church goes through, Christ's people, Christ's church, Christ's purposes, Christ's plan will triumph at last. There will be many who leave the church. There will be those who criticize the church and its leadership. There will be those who cast doubt on the eventual triumph of the church.

These naysayers are wrong. Christ's church will be victorious at last! The Bible is clear on this point. Christ's own words come echoing and reechoing down through the centuries, "I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).

That is why I believe in the church.

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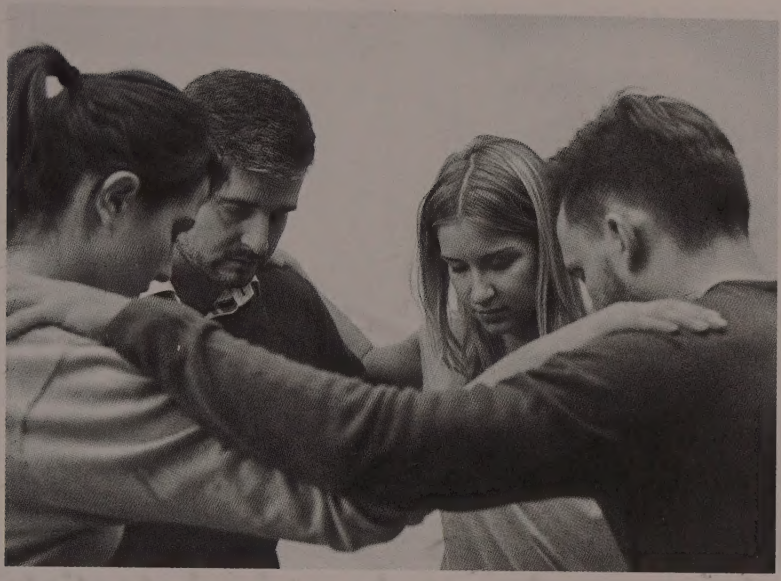

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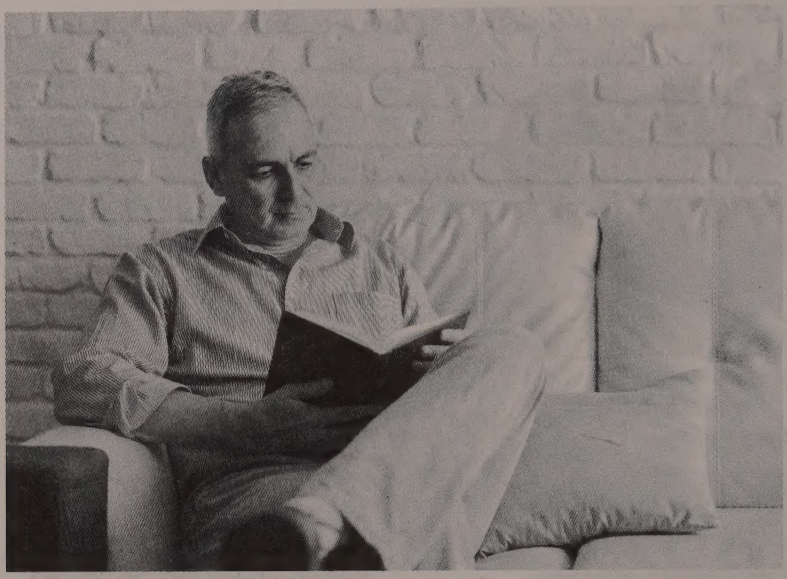

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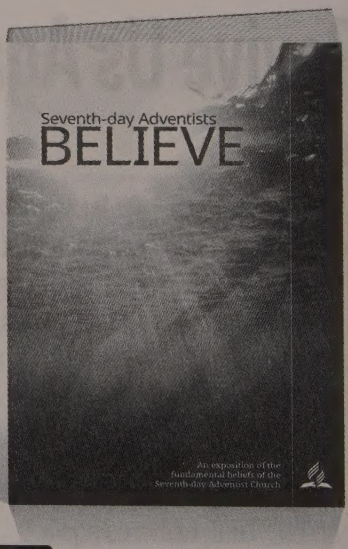

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No matter how challenging the days ahead, no matter how dark the future becomes, no matter what difficulties the church goes through, Christ's people, Christ's church, Christ's purpose, and Christ's plan will triumph at last.

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